

[Contribution to *T&T Clark Companion to the Atonement*, edited by Adam J. Johnson. ISBN: 9780567565532. Publisher website: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/tt-clark-companion-to-atonement-9780567565532/>]

Rudolf Bultmann

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Rudolf Bultmann is not known for his theology of the atonement, and for good reason.¹ He says relatively little about the doctrine, and when it does come up, he is an unwavering critic.

Precisely for this reason, however, he makes an important contribution to the conversation.

I. History

Atonement or expiation (*Sühne*) is just one image among many in the NT, which specifies, for Bultmann, the sacrificial nature of Jesus' death, in which forgiveness of sin is effected by the shedding of his blood. Bultmann acknowledges that Jesus' death was understood "as an atoning sacrifice [*Sühnopfer*] already in the early church-community" (Bultmann 1954, 47). This is indicated especially by the tradition of the eucharistic meal, which is closely associated with sacrificial language (Bultmann 1954, 144, 147), as well as the frequent talk of Jesus dying "for our sins" and "for us" (Bultmann 1954, 47, 84, 290). The sacrificial understanding of Jesus' death within the early church finds further support in Paul's use of ἱλαστήριον ("means of expiation") in Romans 3.25, but also by the fact that such language is atypical for Paul; he appears to be using traditional Jewish-Christian language that predates him (Bultmann 1954, 47,

¹ By "atonement" we refer here to the idea of the cross as an atoning sacrifice. This is, admittedly, a narrow view of atonement, but I focus on this aspect to highlight key features of Bultmann's thought. In German the word for atonement is *Sühne*, translated as "atonement" or "expiation." In Bultmann's writings, it also appears in two other forms: *Sühnopfer* (sometimes *Sühneopfer*), meaning "expiatory (or atoning) sacrifice," and *Entsühnung*, meaning "expiation" or "remission." A broader study of atonement in Bultmann would have to examine two other words: *Erlösung*, translated as "redemption," which he associates with Gnosticism; and *Versöhnung*, translated as "reconciliation," which he associates with Pauline theology.

290–91). “The interpretation of Jesus’ death as an *atonement sacrifice for sins*” was therefore not a view specific to Paul or to any one community of the ancient church, but was “a general-Christian idea” (Bultmann 1954, 84). In short, Bultmann the historian recognizes that talk of Jesus’ death as an atoning or expiatory sacrifice is part of the original theology of the Christian community. That in itself, however, does not make the idea theologically normative.

There are two primary reasons that Bultmann puts forward for rejecting a traditional view of the atonement: (1) a theology of divine action and (2) the hermeneutical problem. I will treat these in order.

II. Theology

An early clue to Bultmann’s theology of atonement appears near the end of his 1926 book, *Jesus*, where Bultmann discusses the act of forgiveness, which is an event that cannot be seen “objectively” as part of the “world of objects.” By contrast, “church tradition . . . sees the event, the decisive act of salvation, in the death of Jesus or in his death and resurrection” (Bultmann 1983, 144).² Insofar as the salvific death and resurrection of Jesus are understood in the tradition “as occurrences of history” that are objectively observable, the church is “wrong.” For “all speculations and theories are false that seek to secure through proof that the death and resurrection of Jesus have the power of forgiveness for the atonement of sins [*Sündensühne*]” (Bultmann 1983, 144). The problem with church tradition on this point is that it binds salvation to a sacrificial logic and portrays the crucifixion as a kind of objective, causal mechanism that

² Given this distinction between the early community and later church doctrine, Bultmann argues that just as the Gospel of John evinces the work of an ecclesiastical redactor in favor of sacramentalism, so too the epistle of 1 John evinces redaction “in the interest of a proposition of church dogmatics, . . . namely the proposition of atonement [*Entsühnung*] through the blood of Christ” (Bultmann 1967, 391).

propitiates God. Bultmann calls this speculative or theoretical, since it interprets the significance and efficacy of Jesus' death by positing a metaphysical explanation.

Bultmann is here giving voice to his inchoate doctrine of divine revelation and action, which he was still developing in light of his turn to dialectical theology in 1920. Karl Barth and Friedrich Gogarten convinced him that, given the justification of the ungodly, God has to be understood as an eschatological (i.e., "wholly other") reality that acts within the world in a way accessible to faith alone. Consequently, divine action cannot be apprehended within the "world of objects" as one cosmic force among others. Just as divine justification reveals our inability to secure forgiveness of sin by our own moral effort, so too it reveals our inability to secure knowledge of God through our own intellectual effort. The latter is what Bultmann has in mind when criticizing theories and proofs about the death and resurrection of Jesus. Such theories objectify Christ in a way that no longer requires an encounter with him through faith, and thus they no longer speak of the same reality. Bultmann's later theology remains consistent with the views articulated in the 1920s. What changes in his later work is that he gives more sophisticated attention to the problem of hermeneutics.

III. Hermeneutics

The problem of hermeneutics can be summarized as the problem of translating the kerygma from one cultural-historical situation to another. The biblical texts "speak in a foreign language with concepts from a faraway time, from a foreign world-picture." As a result, "they must be *translated*, and translation is the task of historical science" (Bultmann 1960b, 145). Bultmann's hermeneutical program is an attempt to understand the message of the New Testament within a new cultural context or "world-picture" (*Weltbild*). Perhaps nowhere is the hermeneutical

problem more acute than in the doctrine of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross, for here we face a world-picture—shaped by assumptions regarding the propitiating and expiating power of animal sacrifice—that is utterly foreign to most people today.

Bultmann is of the conviction that we are no more bound to traditional interpretations of the atonement than we are bound to the Hellenistic culture of first-century Palestine, not to mention the still older cultures of the Ancient Near East. The point is not that we can simply dismiss the thought-world of that time, but that we cannot pretend we share their world-picture; we need not and should not bind our theology to a foreign conceptuality. In order to do justice to the historicity of both text and reader, we need to differentiate between the NT talk of Jesus as a sin offering and the soteriological meaning of such talk. Conflating the two is to speak mythologically, while contextualizing the latter within a new conceptuality is to speak existentially. Bultmann thus replaces the idea of the cross as an expiating sacrifice with the idea of an “eschatological occurrence” that places one before the decision of faith (Bultmann 1960a, 187).

In conclusion, Bultmann finds a traditional account of atonement or expiation problematic because talk of a sin offering bearing the sins of the people is not only a culturally relative notion, but it also objectifies and misrepresents the nature of divine action. According to Bultmann, therefore, “this then is the task of theology: to make this word of the cross understandable—not through any dogmatic theory about the vicarious atonement of Jesus Christ, but as the word that calls him who hears it to accept the cross” (Bultmann 1958, 967).

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