

The Atonement as Expressed in Mark's Sacramental Theology

By Peter J. Scaer

Atonement: The Lay of the Land

It was much simpler, not that long ago. A seminarian taking an essay test on the Atonement, had only to remember the three A's: Anselm, Abelard, and Aulen. Abelard held to an exemplary view of the atonement, which rang hollow apart from Anselm's assertion that Christ's death actually accomplished something. Aulen's "Christus Victor" shook things up a little, trumpeting Christ's death as victory over sin, death and the devil. Now, quite frankly, it's a mess. Anselm is judged not simply inadequate, but anathema. As C.J. den Heyer, a professor of New Testament at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches puts it, "How can the death of someone in a distant past mean salvation and redemption for me, living centuries later? This notion no longer inspires many people today, but rather provokes opposition."¹ While den Heyer's wrong to assume that Anselm's doctrine of the atonement no longer inspires, he is right about the opposition.

Feminist theologians have been in the vanguard of the insurgency. Joanne Carleson Brown and Rebecca Parker contended that Anselmic atonement is the source of Christianity's supposed "oppressiveness," and promotes the idea of a "blood-thirsty God."² They infamously declared that the atonement amounts to nothing short of divine child abuse. Rosemary Ruether systematized feminist thought, arguing that the traditional understanding of atonement promotes

¹C.J. Den Heyer, *Jesus and the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Trans. John Bowden; Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998) 132.

²Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. Edited by Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989) 1-30.

violence, not to mention the evils of patriarchy.³ Echoing the feminist critique, pacifist J. Denny Weaver expresses disdain for a view of atonement that demands depends on violence to provide satisfaction.⁴ In his work *Problems with the Atonement*, Stephen Finlan notes that proponents of Liberation theology, Womanist theology, and Black Theology have all weighed in against the traditional atonement.⁵ Finlan proceeds to summarize the objections, noting that the Anselmic Atonement is “primitive” (p.106), “superstitious” (p.106), “destructive of monotheism” (p. 108), and, for good measure, a “font of anti-Semitism,” (p.116) The very necessity of Christ’s death is questioned. As Finlan bluntly puts it, Jesus “did *not* [italics his] think that it was God’s will that he should be murdered.” (p.109)

It has to be added, however, that the doctrine is attacked not only on the fringes. Consider the promisingly titled book *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, published by InterVarsity. In it Joel Green and Mark Baker proclaim that the cross is “the defining symbol of the Christian faith.”⁶ In an ecclesiastical culture of prosperity theology, and with both Mormonism and Islam are on the rise, such attention to the cross is refreshing. Green and Baker helpfully speak of the manifold ways in which the death of Christ may be articulated. Abelard is credited for exemplary atonement, and Aulen for Christus Victor. The authors go further, and show how developing Christianity in Japan has emphasized the way in which Jesus’ death provides salvation from shame. Other more obscure models likewise receive positive attention. One view, however, is singled out for extensive criticism: namely, that sin incurs a debt or

³See, for instance, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

⁴J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001)

⁵Stephen Finlan, *Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005).

⁶Joel Green and Mark Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Texts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

penalty that must be paid, and that Christ pays this debt, on behalf of humanity, to the Father.

What is wrong with the Anselmic view? First, we should know that it is medieval, which is code for backwards. Secondly, we should be aware that it is a Western idea, which in scholarship, is a synonym for shallow, hierarchical, and possibly imperialistic. Thirdly, substitutionary atonement is based on a judicial model that is supposedly specific to our culture. Christian missionaries, we are told, have discovered “huge populations of our world for whom guilt is a nonissue.”(p. 29) (The idea of making guilt an issue by preaching the law doesn’t seem to have occurred to the authors.) Fourthly, Anselmic atonement promotes patriarchy, which of course, is cruel by nature, and a stepping stone to the “legitimation of unjust human suffering or the idealization of the victim” (p. 30). Finally, as we know, sin is not our fault. Under-represented groups cannot be accused of sin, for they are oppressed. The rest of us can blame our families, genetics, and society at large. (p. 29) And, as if we haven’t heard this before, we are told that by placing our guilt on Jesus, there will be no basis for moral behavior (p. 31). So, paradoxically Green and Baker tell us that we are not to blame for our sin, while simultaneously encouraging us to take responsibility for our actions.

Now, all of these attacks on the Anselmic view may be lumped together, however inelegantly, as attacks by the left, and its desire to mitigate the place of human culpability. I am reminded of a now three-decade old Monty Python skit, in which the arrested thief defends himself, saying, “I’m not to blame. It’s society’s fault.” At which the police respond, “Ok then. Arrest society.”

Light from the East?

It seems to me that another related challenge to the notion of substitutionary atonement

comes not from the liberal West, but from the East. In his work *Light from the Christian East*, James Payton informs us that the Eastern church has not focused on such Western notions as “the justice of God, the question of humankind’s guilt, the necessity of satisfaction, payment of debts, being justified, standing before God in his court and the like.”⁷(Downersgrove: InterVarsity Press, 2007) 121. As Payton notes, many in the Eastern tradition are wont to say that the real problem facing humanity is not sin, but death, and that the real goal of the Christian life is not forgiveness, but life in God, or some form of divinization. This divinization occurs primarily through the sacraments, where the Christian is healed and brought closer to God. The Orthodox John 3:16 might very well be 2 Peter 1:4, which speaks of us becoming “participants of the divine nature.” This passage has signal appeal for those longing for a fuller sacramental understanding of the Christian life. And, no doubt, there is something to learn here. On the other hand, topics such as the justice of God, humankind’s guilt, the necessity of satisfaction, payment of debts, being justified, and standing before God in his court are also thoroughly biblical. Some of us might also want to add that while life with God is the ultimate goal, death is not the ultimate problem, but more precisely the fruit of a tree, which has sin at its root. Without the justice of the cross, the devil’s accusation stands, as does the unpaid sin, which prevents full communion with God.

Uneasy Allies

To their credit, many of the strongest proponents of the Anselmic model of Atonement are often traditional Evangelicals and Calvinists. In recent years, works by the like of David Peterson, Robert Letham, Thomas Schreiner, Roger Nicole, J.I. Packer and others have provided welcome ammunition in the war to defend the traditional doctrine of the atonement.

⁷James Payton, *Light from the Christian East: An Introduction to the Orthodox Tradition*

Yet, for Lutherans, a sense of unease remains. Robert Letham, for instance, has written the largely excellent book *The Work of Christ*. In it, he provides a sturdy Biblical Defense of Penal Substitution: namely the doctrine that Christ has paid for the penalty of sin on the cross. What follows though is an Appendix on the “The Intent of the Atonement.” Here Letham frets that the idea that Christ died for all will lead to universalism. Some idea of limited atonement is necessary, lest we think that God’s work is not efficacious. Likewise, writers such as J. Ramsey Michaels and Roger Nicole argue for the idea of a limited, or as they put it, “definite atonement.”⁸ Thus, they avoid the idea that “Jesus died for everyone indiscriminately.”⁹ They aim to make salvation and atonement co-terminous. The Reformed view that “Christ died efficaciously for the elect alone” is meant to safeguard monergism and the atonement’s efficacy. As Sinclair Ferguson asks, “For if Christ’s atonement was made for someone who was never saved by it, how can I look to it with confidence that I will be saved by his precious blood?”¹⁰

This puts Lutherans in a bit of a quandary. We want, in the strongest way, to proclaim the guilt of sin and necessity of payment. With our evangelical friends, we want to say that Christ’s death actually accomplished something. What we do not want is to lose the doctrine of objective justification, and universal atonement: the belief that by the death of Christ, God is reconciled to the whole world.. The God of the limited, or “definite” atonement is not a God at peace with humanity, or at least, not all of humanity. In fact, one might argue, he looks not unlike the caricature of the God portrayed by those who rail against the Anselmic atonement. Yes, such a God may be glorious, but is he all loving? Thus, Lutherans may well lean on Reformed

⁸J. Ramsey Michaels, “Atonement in John’s Gospel and Epistles,” in *The Glory of the Atonement*. 106. See also, in the same volume, Raymond A. Blacketer, “Definite Atonement in Historical Perspective.”

⁹J. Ramsey Michaels, “Atonement in John’s Gospel and Epistles,” 117.

scholarship, but are understandably wary of where they may fall.

The next question is whether there can be any real intersection between sacramental and atonement theology. Does a strong sacramental theology militate against a strong doctrine of the atonement? Or, do the Sacraments necessarily lead us to a more therapeutic understanding of salvation at odds with substitutionary atonement? Many of those who promote sacramental theology downplay or disavow Anselm. On the other hand, the most prominent defenders of the doctrine often have little to say about sacramental theology. Or worse, some pit sacramental theology against a true understanding of the gospel.¹¹

What I think needs to be established, or at least explored, is relationship between the atonement and sacramental theology. One place to begin may be the gospel of Mark.

The Gospels within the Biblical Debate Over the Atonement

The biblical debate over the doctrine of the Atonement is wide-ranging, covering most all the canon of scripture, from the meaning of the Exodus, the Levitical Sacrifices, and the Suffering Servant, to the translation of ἱλαστήριον in Romans 3 and the role of Christ's priesthood in the Hebrews.

¹⁰Sinclair B. Ferguson, "Preaching the Atonement," in *The Glory of the Atonement* (439).

¹¹Such is the case, perhaps, with David Peterson's *Where Wrath & Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today*, in which Alan Stibbs adds a two-page epilogue on the sacraments, mentioning in passing "the unworthy practice of infant baptism." Alan M. Stibbs, "Appendix: Justification by Faith: The Reinstatement of the Doctrine Today," in *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* Edited by David Peterson (Paternoster Press, 2001) 173.

Given their centrality to the Christian story, less attention has been paid to the gospels than one might expect. Most New Testament atonement discussions center on Paul first, and then proceed to the gospels. Martin Hengel, in his marvelous little work *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament*, notes that the kind of atonement formulae found in the Pauline epistles “retreat into the background in the synoptic tradition.”¹² In this view, Paul writes the definitive theology, which is then given biographical background by the evangelists. Yet there’s another way of thinking about it. That is, the Gospels represent the very heart of the atonement, and are scripture’s purest expression of a God who is truly at one with humanity in Christ.

The Meaning of Christ’s Death in Mark

Some argue that Mark is not the best gospel for seeing the fullness of the atonement. The second evangelist lacks much of our Lord’s teaching ministry. He omits the Lord’s prayer, and therefore the petition “Forgive us our debts.” (Matt 6:12) Likewise, he does not include the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:21-35). These and other texts would be useful in explaining sin as debt that must be paid. When it comes to the atonement, one is tempted to agree with C.J. den Heyer, who comments that the evangelist Mark “offers relatively few new perspectives on the suffering and death of Jesus.”¹³

On the other hand, Christ’s death is the pivot of Mark’s entire gospel. Strikingly, Mark, excluding the later additions, omits resurrection appearances, and leaves us only with an empty tomb. Furthermore, no human being declares Jesus to be God’s Son until the crucifixion. As Ernest Best aptly puts it, “The death of Jesus broods over the entire Gospel.”¹⁴ As such, Jesus’

¹²Martin Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981) 34.

¹³C.J. Den Heyer, *Jesus and the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Trans John Bowden; Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998) 80.

¹⁴Ernest Best, *Mark: The Gospel as Story* (SNTW; Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1983) 66.

atoning death takes center stage in the Markan drama.

Christ's Death is Necessary

Some strangely argue that Christ's death was not necessary. As Stephen Finley writes, "Jesus did not come to earth in order to be murdered. He tried to lead his people into a new age of spiritual illumination, which would have followed upon acceptance of his revelation."¹⁵

Against such a blatant misreading are numerous Markan passages based on our Lord's own teaching: And, it should be noted that Jesus, not Paul, is the first and greatest gospel preacher. As Mark writes, "And with boldness he [Jesus] began preaching the Word." (Mark 8:32) What word? The word of the cross. Mark writes, "And he began to teach them that the Son of Man *must* suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and that he be killed, and after three days rise again." (8:31). This theme of necessity is repeated in Jesus' passion predictions in Mark 9:31 and 10:33-34, where Jesus again speaks of the inevitability of his death. What's more, the basis for the necessity of Christ's death is found in God's will, as expressed in the Scriptures. In 9:12, Jesus interprets his death in this way: "It is written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt." Again, at the Supper, Jesus says that "The Son of Man goes as it is written of him." (14:21) Yet again, as he is being arrested, he says, "Let the Scriptures be fulfilled." (14:49) Thus, Jesus describes his own death as necessitated by the scriptures, and therefore by God himself. Though Jesus prays that the cup may pass from him, he nevertheless proceeds to drink the cup of suffering, in accordance with the will of his Father. (14:32-42) Of course, to say that Jesus' death was necessary does not then define the exact nature of that necessity.

Christ's Death is an Example, Victory and Ransom

¹⁵Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 110.

Abelard could have very well drawn upon Mark in asserting Jesus' death as exemplary. When speaking of his death, Christ himself offers himself as a model for the Christian life: "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all (Mark 10: 43-44). True disciples called upon to follow the example of our Lord, who "came not to be served, but to serve." (10:45)

Still, the exemplary nature of Christ's death hardly exhausts its meaning. As others have remarked, for his death to be exemplary it must also have purpose. Roger Nicole puts it well when he writes:

Yet for any action to be truly exemplary, it is necessary that it have an appropriate motivation. If I should die in attempting to save a drowning child, my action may be judged heroic and exemplary. But if I thrust myself in the water to give an example to those present, my act will be seen as insane and far from a paragon of virtue.¹⁶

Accordingly, after describing his death as exemplary, our Lord then offers the *Locus classicus* for Atonement: "The Son of Man has come . . . to give his life as a ransom for the many. (Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28) First, as a matter of housekeeping, we should not think of "many" in such a way that we say that Christ's ransom is for many, but not for others. As James Edwards notes, "In Semitic grammar, "the many" normally stands for totality, all."¹⁷ This Markan/Matthean passage has a close parallel in 1 Timothy 2:6, where Paul writes that Christ "gave himself as a ransom for all." So also, in Romans 5, Adam's sin results in the judgement and death for the masses, that is all humankind, so also, Christ's act of obedience has a positive effect for the masses, that is for all humankind. Thus, in Mark 10:45, we do well to say that Christ died for the

¹⁶Roger Nicole, "Postscript on Penal Substitution," in *The Glory of the Atonement* ed. Charles Hill and Frank James (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004) 447.

masses, among whom we are all numbered.

In what way is our Lord's death salvific? In 10:45, Jesus describes his death as a λύτρον, which may be translated as ransom or redemption. As many have noted, the term λύτρον is an echo of the Exodus story, where the Lord redeems his people Israel out of the bondage of slavery. For instance, we may consider Exodus 6:6, where the Lord says to Moses, "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement." This is the same way the term is used, for instance, in Luke's Benedictus, where Zechariah sings, "Praise be the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and made a redemption (λύτρωσιν) for his people." (Luke 1:68)

Yet, a number of scholars have cautioned that this supposed metaphor should not be pressed beyond its limits. In the book of Exodus the Lord redeems with his arm, and by his mighty acts. Thus, God redeems not with payment, but power. When Christ speaks of his death as a redemption, he evokes memories of deliverance from the Pharaoh, and escape from Egypt, and, as such proclaims his own victory over sin, death, and the devil. Thus, our Lord proclaims himself Christus Victor. Score one for Aulen.

Yet, while the Christus Victor theme is present, it does not tell the whole story. Even as the death of Jesus broods over the gospels, so also death broods over the Exodus. The Children of Israel were not only redeemed out of Egypt, but they were also saved from the angel of death. This came at a price: namely, the blood of the Passover Lamb. Those whose doors were not marked by the lamb's blood lost their firstborn to the angel of death. So, it is telling that each of the gospels, Mark included, frames Christ's death within the Passover tradition (Mark 14:1). Mark pictures Jesus' death in terms of the sacrifice of the Passover lamb (14:12). Christ is the

¹⁷James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 327.

first-born, the spotless lamb whose blood is shed so that we may escape death's angel.

Further, we would do well to consider the work of Simon Gathercole who has shown that the term λύτρον is also found within the legal framework of Exodus.¹⁸ Particularly, he points to passages such as Exodus 21:29, where Moses lays down this law: "But if the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not kept it in, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death." The owner may avoid the death penalty, notes the Lawgiver. "However, if payment is demanded, the owner shall give a ransom (λύτρον) for his life, whatever is demanded." Thus, within the immediate context of the Exodus, the term "ransom" cannot be used simply as a metaphor for salvation or liberation, but implies that a definite price must be paid for that freedom. Thus, the term "ransom" carries with it the idea of exchange or bartering.

Many have also noted that Mark 10:45 strongly echoes Isaiah 53. By offering to give his life, Christ identifies himself as the Suffering Servant, the one who will bear the iniquities of others (Isa 53:11), and carry "the sin" of many (Isa 53:12). With the result that "many" will be accounted righteous (Isa 53:11). R.T. France aptly concludes, "This accumulation of verbal echoes of Is. 53:10-12 is compelling in itself, and it is the more so when it is recognised that the whole thrust of Is. 53 is to present the servant as one who suffers and dies for the redemption of the people, whose life is offered as substitute for guilt."¹⁹ France astutely observes that it would be hard to offer a better summary of Isaiah 53 than Jesus' own words, "The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mk 10:45)

In sum, Abelard, Aulen, and Anselm can all be supported by Mark 10:45, not as

¹⁸Simon Gathercole, "The Cross and Substitutionary Atonement," in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 21:2 (2003) 152-165.

competing, but complementary themes of atonement. Without Anselm, though, the exemplary nature of the atonement is lost, as is the victory over death.

Jesus Describes His Atonement Sacramentally

What has not been such a prominent part of the atonement discussion is the relationship between the atonement and the sacraments. And, this, I think is crucial. For atonement has to do with reconciliation. What can atonement mean if God do not come in touch, and stay in touch with his creation? Without incarnation, atonement is a theory. Without the sacraments, atonement becomes history. In the incarnation, and then in the sacraments, atonement is actualized. For in the sacraments, not only do we receive a pledge of forgiveness, but we come into contact with the God who is not alienated from us, but with us in Christ. God's forgiveness and presence are two sides of the same coin. In this regard, it is interesting to see how closely the gospel of Mark ties together the death of Jesus to his sacramental ministry. The first instance of this has been much discussed: namely, the relationship between the atonement and the Lord's Supper.

The Atonement and the Lord's Supper

The setting of the Last Supper is the Passover meal, a point Mark repeatedly underlines (Mark 14:1, 12, 14, 16). The reader is thereby reminded that redemption is accomplished and actualized by the sacrifice and eating of the Passover lamb. In what may be the apex of atonement theology, our Lord echoes his previous ransom statement, saying, "This is my blood of the covenant shed on behalf of many." (14:24) Thus, as he did earlier, our Lord speaks of his death as a sacrificial self-giving for the masses. Yet, now he links that sacrificial giving to the Supper, and in particular to the shedding of his blood. Here our Lord's words echo not only

¹⁹France, *Mark*, 420.

Isaiah 53, but also Exodus 24:8, in which Moses offered and sprinkled the blood of the covenant (τὸ ἅιμα τῆς διαθήκης). As in Exodus 24, the shedding of blood provides necessary atonement, and enables the Lord to eat and be one with his people. The Supper and Atonement are linked further in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus willingly drinks the cup of judgement. Thus, Christ drinks in judgement so that his disciples may drink in forgiveness. The shed blood speaks of sacrifice, and the very basis of redemption for “the many.” The death of Jesus becomes the basis of a new relationship between God and his people, and this relationship finds its bond in the blood which Jesus sacrifices (atonement) and shares (sacrament). The historical enactment of atonement (the shedding of blood on the cross) will be actualized as the disciples continue to drink it anew in the kingdom of God (sacrament).

Baptism and the Atonement

That the Lord’s Supper should be linked to the Atonement is not so surprising, and has been dealt with more fully by many others. What is remarkable, though, is the way the Mark links Baptism to the Atonement and the Atonement to Baptism.

Atonement is, at its very heart, the bridging of the gap between God and man, and the breaking down of barriers. Perhaps there is no more telling symbol of this than the temple curtain which is the final barrier that separates God’s people from his immediate presence. Beyond this curtain, only the High Priest walked only once a year, on the day of Atonement. In order to enter past this curtain, the High Priest was required to offer a sin offering and a burnt offering. He would then, in a type of Old Testament Baptism, bathe his body in water, and put on holy garments, (Leviticus 16) Then he would sprinkle blood upon the mercy seat, thereby making atonement for the uncleanness of the people.

Therefore we cannot underestimate the significance of the fact that at the death of Jesus the temple curtain is torn in two, from top to bottom. (Mark 15:38; see Matt 27:51; Luke 23:45)²⁰ The Holy of Holies, the very presence of God, is made accessible by the death of Jesus on the cross. Adele Collins is right to note that it symbolizes “the rending of the barrier between humanity and God,” and it may further signify “that the death of Jesus has made possible access to God for all humanity.”²¹ But Mark takes the tearing of the curtain into a surprising new direction. Mark alone among the evangelists explicitly links the tearing of the temple curtain to Baptism. At Jesus’ death, the temple curtain was torn open (ἔσχίσθη). So also, Mark tells us that at Jesus’ Baptism the heavens are not simply opened (as in Matthew and Luke), but they are “torn open” (σκιζομένους). Not so long ago, scholars attributed such a strange word choice to Mark’s primitive, oral character. As R.T. France notes, “Mark’s use of schizo is vivid and unexpected. He may have chosen it simply for its dramatic impact which is considerable.”²² Working on the assumption that Mark was the first gospel, scholars note how Matthew and Luke smoothed out Mark’s rougher narrative. Mark, however, moves beyond Matthew and Luke, and has a distinctly theological point to make. In our Lord’s Baptism, the Spirit is able to descend, the Father’s voice can be heard, and Jesus is revealed as God’s Son (1:10). In Jesus’s baptism, the wall of separation is violently ripped open. Jesus is baptized unto the death. The tearing open of the heavens is an expression of God’s desire to be at one with humanity, as well as a vivid picture of the price that would have to be paid. Mark would

²⁰There is some debate as to whether the evangelists are referring to the outer or inner curtain. For the writer to the Hebrews, the inner curtain is clearly the significant one (Hebrews 6:19; 9:3; 10:19-20). Given that the outer curtain lacks theological significance, Collins’ judgement that Mark refers here to the inner curtain seems most probable. (Collins, *Mark*, 760).

²¹ Collins, *Mark*, 760.

²²France, *The Gospel of Mark* 77.

have us know our Lord's entire ministry is a passion story, whereby he tears open the curtain of separation between God and man, and ensuring an everlasting Yom Kippur, that is a day of Atonement.

Two Times Three

Perhaps, the most remarkable Markan text linking death and Baptism is 10:38-39. James and John request places of honor at the table of Christ's glory. Jesus asks rhetorically, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?" (Mark 10:38) Thus, Mark again underlines the connection between the suffering of Christ on the cross and the Supper, where he offers a cup of blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Then, in what seems a non-sequitur, Jesus switches from the Supper to Baptism, adding, "or [sc. Are you able] to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (10:38) Mark may not include the Trinitarian baptismal formula, but here we have a three-fold reference to his death as Baptism. This is not incidental or accidental, for our Lord repeats the three-fold baptismal reference, saying, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized." (10:39) Adele Yarbo Collins comments, "Here 'baptism is used metaphorically and refers neither to the baptism of John nor to Christian baptism.'"²³ Why then, one wonders, did Jesus speak with *this* particular metaphor? Especially given the prominence that baptism held in the early church, and within the gospel of Mark itself. Concerning the double three-fold baptismal references, R.T. France comments that Jesus has "coined a remarkable metaphor, drawing on his disciples' familiarity with the dramatic physical act of John's baptism, but using it (somewhat along the lines of the secular usage mentioned above) to depict the suffering and death into which he was soon to be 'plunged.'"²⁴ Yet, Baptism is much more than a metaphor in Mark's gospel. Jesus himself links the cup with

²³Adela Yarbo Collins, *Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2007) 497.

baptism, and both the cup and baptism with death. Moreover, Mark links Jesus' baptism with his death by connecting the ripping of the heavens with the ripping of the baptismal curtain.

The Ministry of Jesus is Baptismal

Something seems to be missing. For R.T. France, Jesus metaphorically recalls John's baptismal ministry. What France, and many others, miss is that Jesus' own ministry is thoroughly baptismal. Yes, John is introduced as one who baptizes (1:4). Within the gospel, he is also the one who introduces the hearer/reader to Jesus. And what does he say of him?: "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (1:9) Strangely within the gospel of Mark, these are the only words that the Baptist uses to describe the Lord's ministry. He doesn't say that Jesus has come to save us from our sins, nor does he call him the Lamb of God. He says only that Jesus has come to baptize. In one small phrase, we are given a summary of Jesus' entire ministry: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

What can John the Baptize mean by this? This, I would propose, is a thematic verse, that clues the reader in on how to understand the entire gospel. If we take the Baptist's, and the evangelist's word for it, Jesus' entire ministry is baptismal. What does Baptism accomplish? From elsewhere we know that in Baptism, we receive the Spirit, the devil is driven out, we are able to call upon God as "Abba, Father," we are cleansed from our sin, raised up to walk in the newness of life, and given the garment of Christ's righteousness that covers us.

So also Christ's own ministry in the gospel of Mark. Read against the Baptismal template, Christ's ministry is not simply a laundry list of sign and wonders, but it has a distinctly baptismal shape. And note, this is not a matter of eisegesis, that is, reading into the text, but it is a matter of taking John the Baptist's (and Mark's) word seriously. Jesus came to baptize with the

²⁴R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (416).

Holy Spirit. And so he did. Even as the Baptismal service is a Trinitarian invocation, so also are the Father and the Spirit present in the baptism of the Son. Baptism begins with the rite of exorcism. So also in Mark, Jesus' first recorded miracle is the casting out of unclean spirits (1:26). Baptism washes away sin. So also, Jesus cleanses a leprous man with the words "Be clean." (1:41) Baptism enables us to walk in the newness of life. So also does Jesus say to the paralytic man, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." (2:11). In baptism we share in Christ's resurrection, so also Jesus says to little girl, "Little girl, I say to you, arise" (ἐγείρε). In baptism our mouths are opened to call God Father, so also does Jesus say to the deaf and mute man, "Ephphatha. Be opened." (7:34) And the man's ears were opened and his tongue was released. (7:35) Indeed, in baptism, we receive the garment of Christ's righteousness. Strikingly, in Mark, a woman touches Jesus' garment and is saved. (5:29) Jesus' garment is the sole focus of the Markan transfiguration, where Mark comments that Christ's garments were "intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them." (9:3-4). In short, the whole kaleidoscope of New Testament imagery describing baptism can be found in Christ's own baptismal ministry. Moreover, this ministry is not simply one of healing, but it is salvific. The woman touches our Lord's garment not simply to be healed but to be "saved" (Mark 5:28). Indeed, as many as touched him were "saved" (Mark 6:56).

Jesus' Baptismal Ministry and the Price of Atonement

Matthew understood that Christ's healing ministry was intimately related to the atonement. Even as he heals, he takes our diseases upon himself. Thus in 8:17, he quotes Isaiah 53:4: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases." For Mark also, Jesus' own Baptismal ministry of healing and salvation comes at a price. Though his grace is freely given, it

is not free. He redeems with his mighty arm, but a heavy toll is exacted along the way.

Consider the way the Mark makes the transition from the Baptism to the temptation. Matthew tells us that after his baptism, Jesus was “led up into the desert.” (Matt 4:1) Luke sweetens the story, and tells us that after his baptism, Jesus was “full of the Spirit” and was “led by the Spirit into the desert.” (Luke 4:1). Mark, however, boldly underlines the price of Jesus’ baptismal ministry. Even as he makes it possible for us to enter into the presence of God, the Spirit violently casts him out (ἐκβαλλει) into the desert (Mark 1:12). The Markan word choice of ἐκβαλλει, is not simply for dramatic effect, or to add, as R.T. France puts it, “the immediacy of the impact.”²⁵ Mark again has theology on his mind. Though sinless and well-pleasing to God, Christ receives the same treatment as did the first Adam, whom God drove out (ἐξέβαλεν) of paradise (Genesis 3:24). Again, even as he drives out (ἐξέβαλεν) unclean spirits, so also is he driven out by the Spirit, and left to Satan’s devices. Thus, his baptismal ministry begins with the price of atonement.

So also does it continue. He cleanses the leper, but with the result that our Lord “could not longer openly enter a town, but was out in the desolate places.” (Mark 1:45) Thus, as the leper reenters society, Jesus is pushed to the fringe. The woman who touches Jesus’ garment is healed, but our Lord feels the power that has left him (Mark 5:30) Again, Jesus’ ministry is popular, yet popularity comes at a price. As the crowds gather around Jesus, the disciples make ready the boat lest the crowds “crush” Jesus. The Greek word is “thlibo” and refers to tribulation, the type of tribulation that comes to a culmination in the passion narrative. The crowd that crushes upon Jesus in his ministry, will crush him on the cross. This is the pattern throughout the entire gospel. There is a price to be paid for everything. He frees others, but is

himself arrested. He brings others to life, but himself must be put to death.

Mark and the Sacramental Ministry of Jesus: In Touch with Creation

Sacramental theology preaches a God who is in touch with his creation. Since Christ atones for the sin of the world, there is no longer a barrier between God and man. Thus, God comes in touch with his creation incarnationally and sacramentally. More than any other gospel, I think, Mark emphasizes the fact that the miracles of Jesus are accomplished not only by the power of his word, but also his touch.

When, for instance, Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, he does so by taking her hand (Mark 1:31). Cleansing the leper, Jesus "stretched out his hand and touched him" (1:41). Again, Jairus, whose daughter is at the point of death requests, "Lay your hands on her so that she might be saved and live" (5:23). Upon arriving at Jairus' house, Jesus took the girl by the hand and raised her (3:41). Again, healing the blind man at Bethsaida, Jesus places his hands on the blind man's eyes, so that he sees clearly. (8:25)

Even as Jesus heals by touch, others reach out to Jesus and are saved. The man with the withered hand is told, "Extend your hand." (3:5). He did so and was healed. Again, we are told that Jesus healed many, "so that all who had diseases pressed around him to touch him." (3:10) Again, the woman with the flow of blood reached out "touched his garment" and was saved. (5:27)

Also, we note that within the gospel of Mark especially, Jesus employs earthly elements in his healing/saving ministry. Some may find such references primitive or embarrassing, but, in fact they express the sacramental nature of Christ's ministry. Thus, in healing of the deaf and dumb man, he heals with saliva: "He spit and touched the man's tongue." (Mark 7:31) This

²⁵France, *Mark*, 84.

same saliva he uses in healing the Blind Man at Bethsaida (8:23). In both cases, Christ comes into a most intimate communion with his creation. The water from his body brings life and salvation to others.

He That Believes and is Baptized Shall Be Saved

So it is, Mark preaches the atonement. Christ's has offered his life as a ransom for the masses. Yet, for Mark, there is no divide between this gospel message and the sacramental ministry. The atonement finds its theological culmination in the Last Supper. Moreover, Jesus' entire ministry is fully one of baptismal atonement. Through his touch, he heals and brings salvation. Yet, this saving touch comes at a price. It is not a case of the cross or the sacraments. It is a baptismal ministry unto death.

Unfortunately, Mark has never garnered the respect he deserves as a theologian of the church.

The church fathers neglected him, and ran to Matthew's primacy. The scholars' (most probably mistaken) assumption of Markan primacy has proved a mixed blessing. We know much about Mark the storyteller. Yet, to this title, we may have to add, Mark the preacher of the cross and Mark the theologian of Baptism. Whether the final ending was written by Mark or not, the writer captured succinctly the character of the gospel's message: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation: (namely) 'He who believes and is baptized shall be saved.'"(16:16)