

Atonement, Reconciliation and Restitution

Doxology

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Invocatory Prayer

Dear Father,

Thank you for giving me the gift of eternal life, your Holy Spirit who testifies with me that I am a child of God, the forgiveness of sin and the peace of God that comes with knowing your constant love and care. May this time of fellowship and sweet communion be a blessing for both of us.

I pray in Jesus' Name.

Hymn: *by James G Small*

1. I've found a Friend, O such a Friend! He loved me ere I knew Him;
He drew me with the cords of love, and thus He bound me to Him;
And round my heart still closely twine those ties which naught can sever,
For I am His, and He is mine, forever and forever.
2. I've found a Friend, O such a Friend! He bled, He died to save me;
And not alone the gift of life, but His own self He gave me.
Naught that I have mine own I call, I'll hold it for the Giver;
My heart, my strength, my life, my all are His, and His forever.
3. I've found a Friend, O such a Friend! So kind and true and tender,
So wise a Counsellor and Guide, so mighty a Defender!
From Him who loves me now so well, what power my soul shall sever?
Shall life or death, shall earth or hell? No! I am His forever.

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Scripture Readings

- Nehemiah Chapter 1 "Corporate responsibility"
- 2 Corinthians 5:11-21 "Reconciliation"

Hymn: *by Philip Bliss*

1. Man of sorrows!
What a name for the Son of God who came ruined sinners to reclaim:
Hallelujah, what a Saviour!
2. Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he stood,
sealed my pardon with his blood: Hallelujah, what a Saviour!
3. Guilty, vile and helpless we; spotless Lamb of God was he,
Full atonement, can it be? Hallelujah, what a Saviour!

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4. Lifted up was he to die; "It is finished" was his cry;
now in heaven exalted high: Hallelujah, what a Saviour!
5. When he comes, our glorious King, all his ransomed home to bring,
then anew this song we'll sing: Hallelujah, what a Saviour!
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Message: Atonement, Reconciliation and Restitution

Have you noticed the increasingly popular thought that people living in the present should atone for the sins of previous generations? More and more we are reminded of the sins of the past, whether mistreatment of indigenous Australians, the enslavement of African peoples, the misery inflicted on poor countries by industrialists and more. Alongside this increased awareness is a corresponding increase in discomfort about any benefit that we might be experiencing as a result of those past evil practices.

- In an article in the Guardian in 9/11/2014, Stewart Dakers proposed a method of atonement for business people now deceased, especially if family related, who many years ago made their fortunes through unethical work and business practices. He wrote: "While I may not be able to repair past damage, I can commit myself to atonement... There are many lying wounded in the ditch, ... many hands held out for support... Maybe by attending the present wounded, listening to the present voice, holding the present hand, I can compensate for past carelessness, and even restore some of its damage."
- Historian David Olusoga is quoted on the msn.com website as saying "As an act of 'restorative justice' King Charles should pay compensation for the Royal Family's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade [which] stretches back to Elizabeth I, who gave a large ship to slave trader John Hawkins in 1564 in exchange for a share in the profits of the voyage. [A good model to follow would be] the Church of England [which] has pledged £100m to 'address past wrongs' after its investment fund was found to have historic links to slavery. That money will be spent on grants for projects helping communities adversely impacted by historic slavery."
- Tasmanian artist Nathan Maynard posted an advertisement in March this year asking for "an Australian of British descent to donate their future deceased body to an art installation [which] will speak of sacrifice for past sins perpetrated against the palawa [aboriginal Tasmanians]".

These statements raise the question of whether or not we can make atonement for the sins of our forbears and whether association through family ancestry or national heritage carries with it genuine guilt that needs to be addressed either at an individual or corporate level.

Of course there's the personal aspect too. What can be done to atone for the wrongdoings of my past that have caused suffering by others, whether or not for personal gain? For older people this can be very troubling as past actions and their consequences cannot be undone, and the older memory seems to make them more vivid.

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It is helpful to first understand whether “atone” is the correct word to use. Is reconciliation or restitution what is really meant? Atone is a word with significant connections to Scripture and the Gospel and to the Lord God himself, clearly understood and explained by etymologist Linda Flavell in her book *Dictionary of Word Origins*, and so its use by atheistic writers is a little puzzling. Even in Scripture, “atone” and “atonement” are predominantly Old Testament words. Of all the translations the NIV uses it more often than most in the NT – only four times (Acts 27:9, Romans 3:25, Hebrews 2:17 and 9:5). Several translations do not use the word at all in the New Testament (ESV, NASB, RSV), which is interesting because most of us would associate atonement with the cross. The word itself is understood differently by theologians, but a consensus is that “the atonement wrought by Christ is a fundamental fact in human salvation, a real covering for sin, the divinely appointed measure for reconciliation between God and man” (MF Unger).

So what is our responsibility with respect to the past, particularly our forbears, whether by nationality, culture or family?

Nehemiah and Daniel are two highly regarded leaders from the same era. Both were affected by the exile to Babylon for which neither was responsible. Both recognised their plight as a result of sin, and in particular the sin of their ancestors. But Daniel prayed “We have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules. We have not listened to your servants the prophets” (Daniel 9:5-6). Nehemiah prayed “confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments.” (Neh 1:6-7) This is inclusivity! A strong argument could be raised in defence of both of these men. “Hey, guys,” we could say, “you don’t have to say ‘we’! You’re not to blame for the predicament of your people. Stop blaming yourselves.” But both Daniel and Nehemiah associated themselves with the sin of their deceased forbears, and the sin of the nation when seeking the Lord’s mercy. So also with David who confessed “Both we and our fathers have sinned; we have committed iniquity; we have done wickedness.” (Psalm 106:6). And Isaiah who cried “Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned” (Isaiah 42:24). And Jeremiah “We have sinned against the Lord our God, we and our fathers ... we have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God.” (Jeremiah 3:24, Lam 5:16) (Thought: Does 2 Cor 15:29 connect with this idea?)

This idea of ongoing community or national responsibility for corporate moral behaviour, for the keeping of God’s law, is also demonstrated in the Lord’s attitude towards nations over time. The Scriptures give strong indication that even where there is entrenched rebellion against his law, ie sin, God will wait patiently for years, decades, even centuries, for repentance, giving time for a turn around. This is evident in the nations of Canaan before the conquest, and in the life of Israel generally, both the north and south kingdoms. But it is the responsibility of just one generation to effect the turnaround after years of rebellion, and Daniel and Nehemiah are good examples of that, including the corporate statement signed by the leaders, recorded in Nehemiah 9 and 10. Note that while Nehemiah 9 talks a lot about ‘them’ and ‘they’, there is also recognition of ‘our’ sin (9:37). (I’m using traditional pronouns here!)

So the Scriptures encourage God's servants to not just acknowledge their own personal sin, as significant as that is, but to also acknowledge and associate with the sin of the present generation, and not just the present generation, but previous generations as well, especially those who should have known better, and to seek God's mercy and forgiveness for the present community or nation in the light of that corporate and historic failure. The premise behind these cries for mercy and forgiveness is the understanding that the wrong doing was first and foremost against the Lord God himself (Psalm 51:4), and it is his mercy and forgiveness that is being sought.

But what about compensation, reparation and restitution? For the individual, the ancient law is clear that appropriate restitution needs to be made according to the nature of the wrongdoing. When Zacchaeus determined to give back fourfold what he had wrongly taken, Jesus' response implied in-principle agreement with his decision (Luke 19:8), which tells us that the OT principle of restitution is to be carried forward under the New Covenant. It would be good if this principle, not just fines, imprisonment and other penalties, was applied far more than it is in the Australian courts.

In the case of institutions, the body corporate continues to exist and have the same ongoing responsibilities regardless of staff turnover. The Levites, if we can call them a body corporate, had responsibility for the maintenance of the Temple, which continued from generation to generation. If previous generations of Levites failed in their duty to maintain the Temple, it was up to the current generation to fix it. A new corporate Board member or new CEO assumes the same liabilities of the previous. So the passing of time and the change of personnel does not negate the liabilities of a corporate body.

With regard to descendants assuming responsibility for the actions of their ancestors, Scripture makes it clear that each individual is responsible for their own actions (Deuteronomy 24:16), a law largely ignored by the ancient kings, an exception being Amaziah, eighth king of Judah (2 Kings 14:5-6). According to Scripture, a grandson cannot be held responsible for the actions of his grandfather. Or a daughter for her father, something that Gina Rinehart knows well.

To now return to our initial point – atonement. I recently read a suggestion on how to effect atonement for the grave misdeeds of one's ancestors. The suggestion was for one to be actively involved in, or to financially support, charities which help those in need, preferably those still impacted by the ancestral wrongs. While engaging in support of charitable work is worthwhile and commendable, such activity cannot effect atonement, or propitiation, or reconciliation. If it could, then we could similarly atone for our own misdeeds. Ten hours of community service and all is forgiven! More or less hours depending on the level of seriousness – a type of Indulgence. Make no mistake, and to repeat myself, helping those in need is necessary and good, endorsed by Scripture (eg Mark 10:21) – may there be more of it, remembering that all we do is as unto the Lord. But it's a grave mistake to think that atonement will be the outcome. One cannot atone for one's own mistakes, let alone the mistakes of one's ancestors. Even the Oxford Dictionary's definition of atone gives as the example of it's use in the negative: "you cannot/ nothing can/ atone for your negligence".

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In conclusion, when reconciliation is sought, there needs to be two components – forgiveness and repentance, with restitution when appropriate. Where atonement, “a real covering for sin”, is sought, there is only One who can atone, and he is the Lord God, and only he can do that because of the work of Jesus Christ, highlighted in his death and resurrection, resulting in salvation from God’s wrath for the individual. And that is available to all who desire it.

Prayer for Suffering Christians: (Barnabas Prayer for 21/5/2023)

Lord Jesus, we bring before You faithful Christians in Iran who are persecuted simply for their devotion to You, for gathering to worship You and learn from Your Word.

We pray especially that You sustain those imprisoned for following You and enable them to know a freedom in their spirit and a conviction that Your Word is never in chains.

We intercede for those in internal exile within Iran, far from the fellowship of Your people.

We pray that they will experience the comfort of the Holy Spirit and deep confidence in His counsel wherever You lead them.

(2 Timothy 2:9; John 14:16)

Hymn: by *Charles Wesley* (note the frequent use of “all” – a study on Christian Perfection)

1. Behold the servant of the Lord! I wait thy guiding eye to feel,
To hear and keep thy every word, to prove and do thy perfect will,
Joyful from my own works to cease, glad to fulfil all righteousness.
2. Me if thy grace vouchsafe to use, meanest of all thy creatures, me,
The deed, the time, the manner choose, let all my fruit be found of thee;
Let all my works in thee be wrought, by thee to full perfection brought.
3. My every weak, though good design o'errule, or change, as seems thee meet;
Jesus, let all my work be thine! Thy work, O Lord, is all complete,
And pleasing in thy Father's sight; Thou only hast done all things right.
4. Here then to thee thy own I leave; mould as thou wilt thy passive clay;
But let me all thy stamp receive, but let me all thy words obey,
Serve with a single heart and eye, and to thy glory live and die..

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