

“HOLY SACRIFICE”

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INTRODUCTION

The expression “Holy Sacrifice,” which forms the topic I have been assigned, involves a redundancy. “To make holy” is what the word “sacrifice” means, derived, as it is, from the Latin ‘*sacer*’ – ‘sacred’, and the verb *facere* – to ‘make’. Yet neither Hebrew nor Greek has an equivalent generic term (despite its appearance in English translations of the Bible). Both languages have, indeed, a whole armory of terms used for specific offerings, but neither has an umbrella term covering all and thereby conveying the overall idea. Still more, nowhere in Scripture is the significance of sacrifice spelled out specifically, for all that sacrifice is spoken of from the first chapters of the Old Testament to the final chapters of the New. It appears simply as a fact of religious life whose meaning was presumably well-understood by worshippers. If we are to uncover its significance, it will most likely be as we examine its practice in the Old Testament, and its usage in the New.

We may begin by attempting to discern the broad features of sacrifice, and then inquire as to whether and how they receive more exact definition in the Old and New Testaments.

I. The Religious Idea of Sacrifice

It is widely agreed that sacrifice is a feature of religion around the world. It is not something confined to the Old Testament or the Near East. Moreover, there appears to be a common pattern or scheme in much, if not all sacrifice. H.Hubert and M.Mauss, in what is still regarded as a classic study of the subject¹ found that scheme to embody at least three elements. First, the entry, in which the worshipper, the sacrificial functionary and the apparatus employed, are specially prepared for the act which, once begun, must proceed uninterruptedly according to the prescribed plan. Second, the sacrificial victim was destroyed, so being separated from the profane world. In short, it was consecrated, thereby giving access to the world of the sacred. The third element is the exit, in which the worshipper, like a deep-sea diver rising by graduated stages from the ocean depths to the surface, returns to the profane world. As Hubert and Mauss summarize: “This procedure consists in establishing a means of communication between the sacred and profane worlds through the mediation of a victim, that is, of a thing that in the course of the ceremony is destroyed.”²

If this reading of the data is sound, it means that the idea of sacrifice rests upon several assumptions. First, it rests upon the idea of the reality of the holy. This implies that there is a great gulf between the world of the Holy where God is, and the world of the profane in which human persons live. Second, it rests upon the assumption that persons will want to enter the world of the holy. Positively, communion with God is a desirable thing; negatively, rejection by God is a fearful thing. Third, it assumes that access to the world of the holy is possible only if some means of dissipating unholiness is available. Where sacrifice is seen to be such a means – as was widely the case – the rationale was evidently that animals (chiefly) fulfilled that role because they were living, and because (in the case of domestic animals) they lived in biotic rapport with humans, and could therefore serve as offerings whose sacrificial death symbolized the seriousness with which the worshippers recognized the holiness of the deity. In a word, the term ‘sacrifice’

¹ H.Hubert and M.Mauss: *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice* (1898), E.T. Cohen and West: *Sacrifice, its Nature and Function*, London, 1964.

² *Sacrifice, its Nature and Function*. 97.

lives up to its meaning of making holy what or who is profane so that they may find acceptance by God, and not be destroyed by the blazing power of his purity.³

II Sacrifice in the Old Testament

There is much about sacrifice in the Old Testament which is obscure to us. The rites themselves are spelled out specifically, but little is said about the words which accompanied them, or why they had to be performed in a particular way. Occasionally, an explanatory phrase is given such as ‘to make atonement’ or ‘as a soothing aroma’, but their meaning is debated. No doubt the meaning was clear to the worshippers in ancient Israel; we are left to draw inferences as best we can. The work of anthropologists on the significance of ritual in primitive societies in combination with the exegesis of the few passages which explain the significance of sacrifice offer the best guidance we have in coming to some understanding.

To begin painting with a wide brush: it is a truism and even a redundancy, to say that sacrifice is a matter of life and death. God is the source of life – holy life – and only the holy can approach him. Since humans are unholy, they can approach him only if a holy means of approach can be devised. This God provided for Israel, in the form of animals that are both clean and unblemished, and so constituted acceptable sacrifices. This was part of the covenant made exclusively with Israel. The animal stands in place of the worshipper who symbolically does to himself what he does to the sacrificial beast: gives himself to God in self-surrender. The same meaning applies to other offerings given with animal sacrifices: for example the cereal offering of wheat and the outpoured offering of wine. These merely repeated the message of the sacrificial beasts. In short, Old Testament sacrifice presupposes a parallelism between the human and animal worlds.⁴ It is on this foundation that the Old Testament understanding of sacrifice appears to rest. From it flow other distinctive features.

The first is the laying of the worshipper’s hands on the animal’s head. Amid competing interpretations⁵ the most probable is that by that act, the worshipper identified himself with the victim. Edmund Leach states: “the plain implication is that, in some metaphysical sense, the victim is a vicarious substitute for the donor himself.”⁶ A second facet of all the sacrifices is that at least part of each is burnt on the altar and makes a “pleasing odor to the Lord” (Lev.1:9; 2:2; 3:5; 4:31 NRSV). John Hartley comments: “This metaphor of ‘a soothing aroma’ is very appropriate, for the sacrifice is offered in order to move God to remember with mercy the one who makes the sacrifice. Usually a whole offering was presented not to cool God’s wrath but to seek his goodwill before his wrath might be kindled.”⁷ Hartley notes that the language is anthropomorphic. Even so, it is difficult to see much difference between God’s being moved to remember his mercy, and seeking his goodwill before his wrath might be kindled. Gordon Wenham points out that the first occurrence of the expression “soothing aroma” in the Old Testament is in Genesis 8:21 where God says that, in consequence of the sacrifice, he will not curse the land again despite human sin. The difference from his destroying the world as in Gen.6:5 lies in the sacrificial offering. As J.Skinner expresses it: “Noah’s first act is to offer a sacrifice, not of thanksgiving but as v.21 shows of propitiation: its effect is to move the Deity to gracious thoughts towards the new humanity.”⁸

³ For a brief account of the idea of sacrifice see D.R.Jones: “Sacrifice and Holiness,” in S.W. Sykes (ed): *Sacrifice and Redemption* (Cambridge, 1991), 9-14. For cautionary words regarding the dangers involved in comparing sacrifice in the non-biblical world with that in the biblical world, particularly the lack of emphasis on sacrificial atonement outside ancient Israel, and the absence of anything resembling the covenantal context of Israelite sacrifice, see Martin J.Selman: “Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East,” in Roger T.Beckwith and Martin J.Selman (edd): *Sacrifice in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), chapter 6, especially pages 88-9, 100-102.

⁴ For a full-scale exposition of this point, with specific reference to *Leviticus*, see Mary Douglas: *Purity and Danger*, (New York, 1966).

⁵ For a brief survey see Gordon Wenham: “The Theology of Old Testament Sacrifice,” in Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J.Selman: *Sacrifice in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 79f.

⁶ E.R.Leach: *Culture and Communication*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 89, quoted in Wenham, art.cit. See Wenham’s accompanying comments, loc.cit.

⁷ John E. Hartley: *Leviticus (Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 4*. Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1992), 22f.

⁸ John Skinner: *Genesis* (ICC, Edinburgh: T and T.Clark, 1930), 157. For a more extended, documented treatment of this point see Gordon Wenham in *Sacrifice in the Bible*, 80f.

The third feature of Old Testament sacrifice is the verb used frequently in company with the phrase “pleasing odor”, namely to “make atonement” (Heb. *kipper*). It is used particularly of the animal sacrifices (Lev. 1:4; 4:20; 5:16). Its meaning is debated.⁹ A critical text in this connection is Leviticus 17:11 where two things appear to be said of animal sacrifice. First, it is God’s gift to sinners to make atonement for them. Second, it does so by the offering of the blood, “for the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement” (NRSV). The natural meaning of this appears to be that the life of the animal functions as a substitute for the life of the worshipper, and in so doing, averts the judgment of God on the worshipper’s sin.

In many respects, sacrifice was a visual representation of God’s covenant with Israel. The choice of an animal represented God’s choice of Israel. The absence of blemish from the victim depicted God’s demand of holiness. The judgment of God on breaches of the terms of the covenant (expressed at length in Leviticus 24 and Deuteronomy 28), as well as the grace by which they were forgiven is expressed in the condemnation of the victim to death. But through the death of the victim, the life of the sinner is spared. The picture of sacrifice thus possesses a theological dimension, which may be summed up as follows.

First, the presupposition upon which sacrifice rests is the reality of the divine holiness, and at the heart of this lie the ideas of distance, separation, exclusion. As D.R. Jones has put it: “(In the Old Testament)...the unifying factor behind the frequent use of *qōdesh* and its cognates is separation, that is, separation from profane use to God’s. Indeed, the opposite of the holy is the profane (*hōl*) or common, a distinction which is nicely brought out in 1 Sam. 21:4: “I have no ordinary bread available. There is only the sacred bread.”¹⁰ However, the meaning of holiness was not confined to the ritual sphere. It also included a moral and spiritual dimension, thanks largely to Israel’s covenant faith. The God who was lofty and exalted was also the God who had come near to deliver his people from Egyptian bondage. The two elements come together strikingly in the account of the giving of the Law at Sinai (Exodus 19:1-20:21). So while an important function of sacrifice was to secure ritual purity, the need for forgiveness of wrongdoing came increasingly to be the dominant meaning given to it (Ezekiel 45:18-25).

A second significant feature in the Old Testament depiction of sacrifice is that it is viewed as a gift of God. No doubt this involves a reversal of appearances, since in sacrifice the worshipper is clearly giving something to God. But appearances are deceptive. If they are not, then the plain meaning is that sinners can buy their own salvation. But if the holiness of God has been correctly understood above, then the distance between God and the sinner can be bridged only by God. Sacrifice is that bridge, and it is a bridge that is built by God to humanity before ever it is crossed by humanity to God. The tabernacle in the Wilderness (Exodus 35:10-39:43) is made according to the specifications laid down by God (Exodus 39:42-3), just as the Temple is God’s gift to them. In the words of Leviticus 17:11: “the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar.” As Th. C. Vriezen expresses it (pointing to the verse just quoted): “Israel’s God does not demand a cult from which he could reap benefit, but on the contrary He gives His people a cult that enables them to maintain communion with Him by means of the atonement.”¹¹ Undoubtedly there is an element of paradox in the idea that God provides the means by which it is possible for the sinner to approach him for pardon and cleansing. But given that he is the Holy One and that humans are the sinners they are, the two can be brought into communion only by an initiative from God’s side. The sacrificial system is the embodiment of that initiative, and signalizes that God is not only perfectly holy, but perfectly loving.

This leads naturally to the third dimension of the Old Testament understanding of sacrifice, namely, that sacrifice is the indispensable means of overcoming the alienation between God and the sinner. D.R. Jones states the reason well. “Sacrifice...corresponds to the seriousness with which the distance (separation, alienation) between God and man is taken. Restoration is costly. The symbol of this cost is blood.”¹² John Hartley makes the same point in even more forceful language: “It needs to be underscored that the

⁹ For a brief account see Wenham, art.cit. 81f.

¹⁰ In Sykes (ed.): *Sacrifice and Redemption*, 14.

¹¹ Th. C. Vriezen: *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), 281.

¹² In Sykes (ed.): *Sacrifice and Redemption*, 14.

sacrificial system proclaims loudly that the penalty of sin is death. Thus the giving of a life on the altar for the life of the offerer upholds justice. The blood rites then have a two-fold function: to cleanse the sanctuary from the pollution of sin and to release the offerer from the penalty of his sinning.”¹³ The act of offering animal sacrifice was a visual proclamation of this. The worshipper would bring the animal to the altar, there laying his hands upon its head (in later times with confession of sin) identifying himself with it, implying that what was happening to the animal was happening to him. The worshipper would then kill the animal, and the priest would offer up the blood on the altar. In this act the worshipper’s sin was removed; God and the sinner were reconciled (Leviticus 17:11). Following this the animal’s body in its entirety was placed on the altar in the Temple, symbolizing that the worshippers were offering themselves completely to God. Depending on the type of sacrifice, the victim would be burned completely, or part used in a sacrificial feast, denoting the restoration of fellowship between God and the worshipper.¹⁴

This, in broad outline, indicates the range of ideas within which the sacrificial system took its meaning in the Old Testament. It is not too much to say that holiness is its presupposition and that sacrifice takes its meaning within the context of the understanding of holiness. We may turn now to inquire to what extent these ideas carried over into the New Testament.

III Sacrifice in the New Testament

We may begin by taking note of a carefully considered summary statement of the place of sacrifice in the New Testament. Professor I.H. Dalferth of Tuebingen has written: “Although sacrificial language is neither frequent nor prominent in most of the New Testament writings, the whole of the New Testament is permeated by sacrificial thought and symbolism. All traditions, from Paul to the Johannine corpus, can interpret Christ’s atoning death for us, not all that often, but unmistakably in constantly changing ways, as a sacrifice, or rather self-sacrifice, and our salvation as redemption through his blood. To this effect a great variety of terms and images are used which are related in various degrees, to various forms of the sacrificial cult of the temple.”¹⁵

The full range of images used in the New Testament to interpret Christ’s atoning death is, indeed, wide. John T. Carroll and Joel B.Green identify “five constellations of images” used to represent the saving effect of the death of Jesus. “These are borrowed,” they say, “from significant spheres of public life in ancient Palestine and the larger Greco-Roman world: the court of law (e.g. justification), commercial dealings (e.g. redemption), personal relationships (whether among individuals or groups – e.g. reconciliation), worship (e.g. sacrifice), and the battleground (e.g. triumph over evil). Each of these examples provides a window into a cluster of terms and concepts that relate to that particular sphere of public life.”¹⁶ I would put the point rather differently by saying that the fundamental category in which Christ’s death is interpreted in the New Testament is that of sacrifice, and that the other categories are drawn into, and interpreted out of, the category of sacrifice.

That Christ’s death is presented widely as sacrificial is hard to dispute. The terms ‘sacrifice’ (*thusia*) and ‘offering’ (*prosphora*) are used of it specifically: as for example, in Ephesians 5:2: “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God; or Hebrews 9:26: “He has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice (*thusia*) of himself.” However, as the Dalferth quotation above indicated, it is not the use of specific terms for sacrifice and offering that is significant so much as the widespread use of related language and symbolism. Accordingly, his death is interpreted as a

¹³ John E. Hartley: *Leviticus*, 65.

¹⁴ Fuller accounts of sacrificial procedure are readily accessible in such places as R.T.Beckwith, art. ‘Sacrifice’ in T.Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (edd):*New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2000), 754-62; R.E.Averbeck: art.”Sacrifices and Offerings”, in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (edd): *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), 706-32; and F. Thiele and C. Brown: art. “Sacrifice” in Colin Brown (ed) : *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1979), 417-38.

¹⁵ In Sykes (ed): *Sacrifice and Redemption*, 302.

¹⁶ John T. Carroll and Joel B. Green, et al: *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (hereafter Carroll-Green: *The Death of Jesus*), Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995, 265.

covenant sacrifice (Mark 14:24; 1 Corinthians 11:25; Hebrews 7:22), a Passover sacrifice (1 Corinthians 5:7-8), a sin-offering (Romans 8:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21), the sacrifice of the Day of Atonement (Hebrews 9:12). Terms such as 'blood' (Matthew 26:28; Romans 3:25; Ephesians 1:7) and 'death' (Romans 5:10; Colossians 1:22), are used singly or connectedly in contexts which make any meaning other than the sacrificial impossible. Indeed, the striking feature in all of this is the way in which forms of sacrifice kept separate in the Old Testament are applied without differentiation to Jesus' death. Nowhere is this done more thoroughly than in Hebrews 9-10 where it is interpreted as the sin-offering of the Day of Atonement (Hebrews 9:6-12), the fulfillment of the covenant-offering of Exodus 24 (Hebrews 9:15-22), and the offering of the red heifer of Numbers 19 (Hebrews 9:13-14).

It is manifestly impossible in the space at our disposal to deal with every category or image used in the New Testament to explicate the death of Christ. The most we can attempt is to examine some representative images or groups of images which figure significantly in this regard. It also serves to give advance notice of the hermeneutical problem involved in the process: namely, the interpretation of the diverse categories and images. Accepting that metaphor is an instrument capable of defining reality,¹⁷ the problem still remains of determining the extent of the intended signification of individual metaphors, not to mention the holding of them in harness with other metaphors which speak of the same reality. Indeed, the New Testament writers frequently mingle metaphors in expounding the atonement, explaining and illustrating one in terms of several of the others.

We may turn now to consider some of the main categories or images used in the New Testament to convey the meaning of the death of Christ, and in particular, to show how the category of the holy enters into them.

A. The Category of Substitution

As we have seen, the most natural understanding of the ritual offering of animal sacrifice in the Old Testament is that the animal takes the place of the worshipper. As Gordon Wenham puts it, "All the animal sacrifices have a common procedural core, i.e. gestures that occur in every sacrifice, laying on the hand, killing the animal, catching the blood and using it, burning at least part of the flesh on the altar. It therefore seems likely that every sacrifice has a common core of symbolic meaning...The animal is a substitute for the worshipper. Its death makes atonement for the worshipper."¹⁸

When therefore, we find Jesus' death spoken of in language that recalls the sacrificial ritual, it is antecedently probable that the frame of reference within which it is used is that of the Old Testament sacrificial system, though its exact sense must be determined in each given context.

A significant passage in this regard is 1 Corinthians 15:3. Paul writes: "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures." The statement is important in numerous respects: first, it shows that Paul had been instructed in this understanding from his earliest days as a Christian: it was something he received by tradition. Second, he regarded it as a matter of the highest moment. The heart of this instruction was that "Christ died for our sins." The implicit assumption is that there is a connection between sin and death: sin leads to and entails death. Hence death is the fate of every sinner. But Christ died for our sins, and therefore, it is implied, the sinner will no longer suffer the death deserved: Christ has done so for us.

That this was Paul's meaning is confirmed by 2 Corinthians 5:14: "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore, all have died." The central affirmation noted in 1 Corinthians 15:3 is repeated, but with some significant additions. First, Christ's death for us is the fruit of his love for us: it is not something wrung from him against his will or imposed on him by force. Second,

¹⁷ For a statement of the case see Colin E. Gunton: *The Actuality of Atonement, A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989), Chapter 2 "Metaphor and Theological Language." The remainder of the book is a consideration of metaphors used of the atonement both in the Bible and the history of Christian thought.

¹⁸ Beckwith-Selman: *Sacrifice in the Bible*, 82.

his death was for all: a point, indeed, not absent from the earlier passage, but stated here explicitly, and repeated in the next verse, as if to underline its importance. Third, in Christ's death, all died. Here the thought goes beyond the idea of substitution (though that is not absent¹⁹) to include representation. Hence Paul draws from the statement that "one has died for all" the inference "therefore, all have died." What he means by this is drawn out in verse 15, namely, that since Christ's death carries within it the potential of new life for all, therefore in dying, all died with him potentially.²⁰

The idea of Christ as sacrificial substitute for the sinner comes to full expression in the final verse of the chapter: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (21)(TNIV). God is the active subject, though, as we have seen in verse 14, this in no way excludes Christ's love for the sinner as a driving factor in his death. The idea which controls the thought is that of exchange. The one to whom sin is alien, God makes sin in our place²¹; and the result of this exchange of places is a change of relationship to God from sinners under condemnation to acceptance in Christ. Barrett's comment brings out the meaning well. "Paul does not say, for by definition it would not have been true, that Christ became a sinner, transgressing God's law; neither does he say, for it would have contradicted all experience (not least in Corinth) that every believer becomes immediately and automatically morally righteous, good as God is good. He says rather that Christ became sin; that is, he came to stand in that relation with God which normally is the result of sin, estranged from God and the object of his wrath."²²

Reservations – to put it mildly – have been expressed about the category of substitution in reference to Christ's death: and here we encounter the question of what the metaphor is intended to express. James D.G. Dunn, who is by no means unsympathetic to the idea of substitution as an element of the New Testament understanding of the atonement, nevertheless finds two weaknesses in it. First, he argues that it is too one-sided. It insists on Jesus as substituting for man in face of God's wrath, but says nothing of Jesus' substituting for God, nothing of God as active subject in the atonement. Second, he finds it to be too individualist, conveying nothing of the corporate or global aspect of the atonement.²³ But is this not to criticize the metaphor for failing to do more than it is either capable of doing or was intended to do?

Two realities lie behind the category of substitution. First, the sinner stands under the judgment of God. The judgment of God is the holiness of God defending itself. The form in which it expresses itself in face of sin is condemnation. The God who did not condemn sin would not, in biblical terms, be a better God. He would not be God at all. Accordingly, sinners stand under that judgment. Still more, sinners by the fact of being what they are, cannot save themselves. Second, the salvation which sinners cannot procure for themselves, God provides in the person of his Son. What they cannot do for themselves God does for them

¹⁹ So C.K. Barrett: *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper's New Testament Commentaries, 1973), 168.

²⁰ It is no accident that the first mention of the atoning death of Christ in the *Manual* is in Article II, *Jesus Christ*. It is after affirming that "the Godhead and manhood are thus united in one Person very God and very man, the God-man," that the article proceeds to state: "We believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins" (*Manual*, 2001-2005, 27). Colin Gunton concludes an examination of representation and substitution by saying that "substitution and representation are correlative, not opposed concepts. Because Jesus is our substitute, it is also right to call him our representative" (*The Actuality of Atonement*, 166). See the entire section, 160-7.

²¹ The debate surrounding the preposition "for us" is largely misconceived, when taken to suggest that, in expressions such as "Christ died for us" hyper can denote only "on our behalf" in the sense of "for our advantage", whereas only anti can denote "in our place." It is clear from the papyri that, while each can be used in the sense indicated, hyper can be used interchangeably with anti. See M. Zerwick: *Biblical Greek* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963) 91-5; Stanley E. Porter: *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2nd edition, 1994), 176f; and for an updated treatment of the evidence of the papyri, Daniel B. Wallace: *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 383-9.

²² *2 Corinthians*, 180.

²³ James D.G. Dunn: art. "Paul's Understanding of the Death of Jesus as Sacrifice," in Sykes (ed): *Sacrifice and Redemption*, 50f; *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 223.

in the substitutionary death of Christ. This is not all there is to the atonement but it is the foundation on which it rests.²⁴

It is important, in understanding the category of substitution, not to conceive it mechanistically. This can happen when the image is pressed beyond its moral limits, and treated in isolation from other metaphors used in the New Testament of the death of Christ. Thus the 'bearing of sin', which is the essence of the metaphor of substitution, does not entail the bearing of guilt, for guilt is not morally transferable. By the same token, the bearing of the penalty of sin does not entail being punished, for the moral experience of being punished is possible only for the offender. The New Testament nowhere says that Jesus was punished or bore our guilt, but it does say that he bore our sins (1 Peter 2:24). What the metaphor of substitution implies is that he accepted and made his own the judgment upon our sin, thereby doing for us what we could never do for ourselves, and without which our case would be irretrievable. Again, the logical and legal limits of the metaphor are pierced by the biblical representation that the substitute is provided by God in his love.²⁵

B. The Category of Reconciliation

The category of substitution is directed chiefly towards the removal of sin as that which is the ultimate offence against God. But great as that is, it is essentially a negative thing. There is also a positive side: the need for a new relationship of peace instead of strife, harmony instead of alienation. Howard Marshall observes that reconciliation is the least metaphorical and most concrete way of expressing the new relationship of the penitent sinner to God. He also notes that it is used theologically only by Paul and is not taken up by second-century writers.²⁶ While the term readily suggests personal relationships, it also finds a place in the language of diplomacy, and something of this appears to enter into Paul's use.

When one inquires how reconciliation enters into the idea of sacrifice, the short answer is that in the two main Pauline contexts in which it is found – Romans 5 and 2 Corinthians 5 – it is connected directly with the death of Christ. The former passage says bluntly: "we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (5:10); while the latter explains the claim that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (5:19) by the affirmation that God "made him to be sin for us who knew no sin" (5:21). This places its finger on the presupposition of reconciliation: the alienation of the world from God because of sin. "While we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Sin is given a particular nuance: "while we were enemies we were reconciled to God" (5:10).²⁷

On this basis Paul proceeds to build his case. First, he affirms emphatically that reconciliation is a divine initiative. The passive verbs in Romans 5:10-11 find their active counterparts in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ...God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself."²⁸ The thought conveyed is remarkable. God brings about the reconciliation of sinners to himself not by effecting a change in them, but by effecting a change in himself: "not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). That is to say: God initiates friendly relations between himself and sinners by putting away the sin which aroused his anger against them.

²⁴ Purkiser, Taylor and Taylor write: "In a biblical view of the atonement, the idea of substitution is inescapable." W.T. Purkiser, Richard S. Taylor and Willard H. Taylor: *God, Man and Salvation* (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1977), 386.

²⁵ This, in essence, is the case Wiley argues. He rejects the idea of penal substitution held in Calvinism as involving a 'quantification' (my term) of guilt and punishment and therefore a limited atonement. (*Christian Theology*, Volume 2, Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1952, 241-244). On the other hand, he goes on to speak of the atonement as "a transfer of penalty from the guilty to the innocent" (279). But the frame of reference within which he understands this is indicated by the later statement: "Christ fulfilled the whole range of moral demand" (280).

²⁶ I. Howard Marshall: "The Meaning of Reconciliation," in Robert A. Guelich (ed.): *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology*, Essays in Honor of George E. Ladd (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 117.

²⁷ Compare the language of "justification through his blood" in Romans 5:9.

²⁸ S.E. Porter has shown that Paul's use of 'reconcile' (*katallassō*) and its cognates referring to God as subject and sinners as object cannot be documented prior to Paul. *Katallasso in Ancient Greek Literature, with Reference to the Pauline Writings* (Cordoba: Edición El Almendro, 1994).

Second, reconciliation is therefore in the first instance the removal of the barrier on God's side. Several points are implied here. The barrier to reconciliation on God's side is his condemnation of sin. This is removed "through Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:18). But it is also removed because "God was in Christ" (5:19). Dunn comments: "The image is not of God as an angry opponent having to be cajoled or entreated, but of God, the injured partner, actively seeking reconciliation."²⁹ Thus we encounter again the paradox seen in sacrifice in the Old Testament: the sacrifice which is required by God's condemnation of sin is provided by God himself. A further implication concerns the scale of reconciliation: it was "the world" which was reconciled to God in Christ. This carries within itself yet another implication: that the reconciliation Paul speaks of as having taken place in Christ's death is objective. This suggests that the primary aspect of reconciliation in Paul's mind belongs less to the sphere of personal relations than to corporate relations: a 'state of peace' rather than a 'state of hostility'. In this sense therefore, reconciliation on God's side is complete. In the words of James Denney: "The work of reconciliation, in the sense of the New Testament, is a work which is finished, and which we must conceive to be finished, before the gospel is preached. It is the good tidings of the Gospel, with which the evangelists go forth, that God has wrought in Christ a work of reconciliation which avails for no less than the world, and of which the whole world may have the benefit."³⁰ And again: "Reconciliation is not something which is doing; it is something which is done."³¹

In consequence of the reconciliation he has accomplished, his spokespersons go forth as ambassadors, beseeching sinners everywhere: "Be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20). Here the aspect of personal relationship comes into its place. Reconciliation of the sinner as individual to God as personal God is by definition a moral relationship and can take place only within a moral framework. As Howard Marshall puts it: "Sinful humanity is thus called to respond to God's initiative, and it is evident that without the answering response no reconciliation can take place."³²

Hence, in the category of reconciliation we see the same pattern which was perceived in the category of substitution. The metaphors are drawn from different spheres, but they exhibit the same truth: the holy love of God. It is noteworthy how readily Paul moves from his exposition of the meaning of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 to the substitutionary explanation of how that reconciliation takes place in verse 21. God's love moves him to effect reconciliation; but it can be effected only in a way which exhibits his holiness by not treating sin as anything less than it is.

C. The Category of Redemption

The background of the New Testament use of the idea of redemption is the Old Testament and the practice of the manumission of slaves. As to the former, the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt became the paradigm for the expectation of the deliverance of his people in the future. The opening words of the Benedictus: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them" (Luke 1:68) and the despairing admission of the travelers to Emmaus that this hope had been dashed (Luke 24:21) are sufficient evidence of this. When we turn to Paul we find the word 'redeem' (*exagorazo*) used to describe the redemption of believers by Christ. This is particularly visible in Galatians where release from slavery is the image employed (3:13; 4:1-5), but it occurs also in 1 Corinthians 6:20 and 7:23) where the qualifying phrase is added: "you were bought with a price." This language is elaborated in Romans 3:24f where the redemption that is in Christ Jesus is described as "a sacrifice of atonement by his blood". This same line of thought is continued in 1 Peter 1:18 where readers are reminded that they were 'ransomed' (*lutroun*) "not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ like that of a lamb without defect or blemish."

²⁹ Dunn: *Theology of Paul*, 229.

³⁰ James Denney: *The Death of Christ*, Its Place and Interpretation in the New Testament (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909, 144-5).

³⁰ Denney: *The Death of Christ*, 146.

³¹ I. Howard Marshall : *New Testament Theology*, Many Witnesses, One Gospel (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 295.

The terminology of 'ransom' has become common currency in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy 2:6; Titus 2:14) in both of which 'ransom' is explicated by the clause "who gave himself for all of us." The echo of Mark 10:45 is clear as is the echo of Isaiah 53:11-12. Despite the scepticism that has been expressed regarding the originality of Mark 10:45,³³ there are good reasons for regarding it as a dominical saying. Its simplicity (in comparison with the forms in the Pastorals), and the evident linkage with the cup-saying in Mark 14:24 and of both with Isaiah 55 confirm this conclusion. Taken together they indicate that Jesus' death is seen as a means of redemption.

What, then, are the conclusions for our topic? First, it seems clear that the primary meaning of redemption is 'being released'. Behind this lies the idea of sin as a slave-master: an image found in some of the Pauline passages. But the power of the slave-master is identified in some contexts as the power of sin, from which emancipation is possible only through sacrificial blood (e.g. Romans 3:24). It is this which leads to the injection of a phrase indicating cost or price. The deliverance of the sinner does not come cheaply. Much mental energy has been spent over seeking to answer the question as to whom the price was paid. It is true that some of the Early Fathers of the Church treated it with great seriousness. But the question is surely no better placed than if, in response to the statement: "He gained his athletic skill at the price of many hours of training", one were to ask: "to whom was the price paid?" The import of the metaphor terminates with its immediate sense: the idea that the accomplishment did not come cheaply.³⁴ It is in this way that the metaphor of redemption functions in the notion of "Holy Sacrifice". Since it is concerned with liberation from sin, and such liberation comes at the incalculable cost of the atoning death of Christ, the idea of the effort or cost entailed in securing release expresses the holy solemnity of salvation. Hence a passage in 1 Peter 1 which begins with an insistent call to holiness because God is holy (14-15), continues: "If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish" (17-19).

D. The Category of Necessity

It might well be asked why a category under the label of necessity deserves separate treatment since there is an element of necessity in each of those already dealt with. Yet the death of Jesus as something that stands under the rubric of necessity is a feature of the presentation of that subject throughout the New Testament. The narrative of both the ministry and passion of Jesus in the Gospels is punctuated by various forms of the expression: "The Son of Man must suffer" (Mark 8:31; 9:12-31; 10:33-4; Luke 17:25). Jesus himself sees his death as the fulfillment of Scripture (Mark 9:12; 14:49). In the Pauline writings it comes into particular view via the metaphor of justification, which is the language of the law-courts. The law is concerned with the maintenance of justice, the preservation of right over wrong.

We must be content to look at one context – and that only cursorily – in which this element comes to prominence: Romans 3:21-6. By common consent this is a critical pericope in Paul's writings. While centrally concerned with justification, other categories or images are brought into relation with it: righteousness, law, faith, redemption, propitiation, sacrifice. There are two problems with which Paul is wrestling in this passage. The first is how a sinful person can be right with God; the second is how a holy God can enter into commerce with sinners. It is not too much to say that for Paul, the second is the greater, for if that problem cannot be solved, then there is no hope of solving the first. What was needed for God was – as Paul puts it, "to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus" (26), or, as the verse could be translated "to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous even while justifying the one who has faith in Jesus." That is to say, forgiveness is a moral problem to God. Indeed, it is a moral problem to everyone, particularly as the moral scale of the

³³ For a summary of both sides of the case see R. H. Gundry: *Mark, A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 587-93.

³⁴ I. Howard Marshall has argued persuasively that the ideas of 'price' and 'cost' are to be distinguished. Art. "The Development of the Concept of Redemption in the New Testament", in I. Howard Marshall: *Jesus the Saviour*, Studies in New Testament Theology (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1990), 239-57.

offence increases. Sin forgiven cheaply cheapens the sin, thereby encouraging its multiplication. This is precisely the reason Paul gives in the previous verse for God's atoning action in Christ. "He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed" (25b). He has not requited sin as it deserved, in the world in general or in Israel in particular with the result that his attitude to sin might be taken to be one of indifference, as though sin were of no particular consequence.

Now however, "the righteousness of God has been disclosed" (21): that is to say, God's way of righting wrong has been made plain in the person and work of Christ. In its outworking it involves the putting right of Jews and Gentiles alike who have faith in Jesus Christ (22-3). This is done as a free gift "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (24): an example how one category (which we have already examined) is used to explain another.

The first part of verse 25 explains the precise means by which God has accomplished this. "God put forward {Jesus Christ} as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood effective through faith." The meaning of this has been fiercely contested. At least its general sense is clear from the result Paul indicates he expects from it in verses 25-6. Jesus Christ as a sacrifice of atonement will silence for ever any doubt that God is indifferent to sin, since until now he has not brought every sin to book. In the words of N.T. Wright: "The first question at issue, then- the aspect of God's righteousness that might seem to have been called into question and is now demonstrated after all – is God's proper dealing with sins – i.e. punishment. Whatever Paul is saying in the first half of v.25, it must be such as to lead to the conclusion that now, at last, God has punished sins as they deserve."³⁵

How has God done this? By putting forward Christ as a sacrifice. The idea of righteous individuals sacrificing themselves as an atonement for Israel was not unknown in Paul's day. The Maccabean martyrs speak of themselves in such terms (2 Macc.7:37-8; 4 Macc.6:28-9) and the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 40-55 was also read in that meaning.³⁶ The word rendered 'sacrifice of atonement' in Romans 3:25 is the Greek *hilasterion* which is the place of atonement in Leviticus 16:14:the lid of the ark on which was sprinkled the blood of atonement. It was thereby the means of atonement: the means of dealing with both God's wrath against or condemnation of sin (i.e. propitiation), and with sin itself (i.e. expiation). Howard Marshall cautions against separating the two. "It is unwise to create a dichotomy between these two actions, since each expresses an aspect of the nature of sacrifice. The points that need to be emphasized are that it is God who provides this remedy for the sins committed against himself and that however the matter be understood, the effect of the action is to deliver sinners from the wrath to which they would otherwise be exposed at the last judgment."³⁷ Since in Romans 3:21-26 Paul formulates the gospel response to the revelation of God's wrath in Romans 1:18-3:20 it would be surprising if it should not be in mind in this passage.

What this amounts to is that we encounter again the same paradox which we have encountered previously. In the Old Testament the sacrifice which God requires, he provides. In the category of reconciliation, the reconciliation which he seeks he himself makes available by his reconciling initiative in which, in and through the person of his Son, he reconciles the world to himself. Now again, the propitiation and expiation which he requires in his holiness, he provides in his love. In the telling phrase of Karl Barth, God is "The Judge Judged in Our Place."³⁸

³⁵ N.T. Wright: "The Letter to the Romans", in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 473.

³⁶ For a carefully nuanced statement of this see N.T. Wright: *Jesus and the Victory of God*, volume 2 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 588-591.0

³⁷ I. Howard Marshall: *New Testament Theology*, 310. A similar conclusion is reached by Charles B.Cousar: *A Theology of the Cross, The Death of Jesus in the Pauline Letters* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 62-4.

³⁸ Karl Barth: *Church Dogmatics*, Volume IV, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, Part One, Part One, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1961), 211.

Of the category of necessity we may therefore say with Thomas C. Oden: “In speaking of the necessity of the Cross, there is no intended implication that God is under an external necessity to resolve the dilemma caused by the history of sin. The moral necessity of atonement is a requirement of God’s moral will. It is necessitated only by the freedom of the holy God to love rightly.”³⁹

The four categories we have examined exhibit a considerable degree of diversity, yet the biblical writers apparently had no difficulty in holding them together – sometimes, as we have seen, in the same context. Evidently, they had no difficulty in holding together in their minds at one and the same time, the ideas that sin must be brought to account, and that God should both do that and also make possible its forgiveness; that forgiveness should be both free and infinitely costly; that the cost of forgiving the guilty should be borne by the innocent; and that God should take upon himself, in the person of his Son, the judgment upon sin which it deserved, thereby becoming both Judge and Judged.

The four categories reviewed: substitution, reconciliation, redemption, necessity are not the only categories used in the New Testament to set forth the meaning of the atoning death of Christ. Christ’s victory over the powers is another, nowhere expressed more vividly than in Colossians 2:15, where they are depicted as chained captives in the triumph train of Christ. The concept of revelation is also drawn into service, not least in the gospels, and especially in John’s gospel, to point to the cross as the moment both of Christ’s greatest humiliation and glorification, of his self-giving and exaltation (John 12:31-3; 13:1-7).⁴⁰ The motif of participation in Christ’s death also plays a significant role. “We have died with Christ” (Romans 6:8) and are called upon on that basis to present ourselves “as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Romans 12:1). Not least, Christ’s death is presented as an example after which we are to pattern our own lives. At the same time, all of these categories presuppose and assume the one single and sufficient sacrifice of Christ. It is instructive to note that, in one of the most extended New Testament contexts in which Christ’s suffering is being enjoined as an example to believers under persecution the thought returns irresistibly to the atoning work of the cross. “Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps... When he was abused he did not return abuse; when he suffered he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:21, 23-4. See the whole sequence: verses 19-24).

IV The Language of Sacrifice and the ‘Manual’

The language of the ‘Manual’ articles referring to Christ and his work seems clearly to reflect the sacrificial understanding of the New Testament. Thus, when Article II affirms: “We believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins⁴¹” it is apparently using the language not simply of Pauline but of pre-Pauline Christianity expressed in 1 Corinthians 15:3 and kindred passages. Article VI is more interpretive, concerned to underscore Wesleyan-Arminian emphases against contending understandings. Nevertheless, the underlying terminology is in line with the New Testament usage, and expressive of the conception of the death of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice. The first sentence reads: “We believe that Jesus Christ, by His sufferings, by the shedding of His own blood, and by His death on the Cross, made a full atonement for all human sin, and that this Atonement is the only ground of salvation, and that it is sufficient for every individual of Adam’s race.” The second half of the second sentence injects the note of the necessity of the response of faith, affirming that Christ’s atonement “is efficacious for the salvation of those who reach the age of responsibility only when they repent and believe.”⁴²

³⁹ Thomas C. Oden: *The Word of Life, Systematic Theology: Volume Two* (Peabody, Mass: Prince Press, 2001), 373. Wiley writes: “God’s nature being that of holy love, He cannot exhibit this love apart from righteousness, and therefore must maintain the honor of his divine sovereignty. This He does, not from any external expediency, but from his essential and eternal nature. Furthermore, love cannot be exhibited apart from holiness...the idea of propitiation is the dominant note in the Wesleyan type of Arminian theology.” H. Orton Wiley: *Christian Theology, Volume 2* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1952), 284.

⁴⁰ For an overview see Carroll-Green: *The Death of Christ*, 272f.

⁴¹ *Manual*, Church of the Nazarene, 2001-5 (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2001), 26.

⁴² *Manual*, 2001-5, 28-9.

If this paper has in any degree succeeded in unfolding the biblical understanding of sacrifice, then what we have encountered throughout is the holy love of God in redemptive mode. The holy love of God is a love too loving not to redeem, and a love too holy not to redeem in a way that would not be redemption because it treated sin as less than it is, and thereby emptied redemption of its meaning. As Thomas C. Oden has expressed it: "God would not be as holy as God is without being incomparably loving. God would not be as loving as God is without being incomparably holy. God's holiness without God's love would be unbearable. God's love without God's holiness would be unjust. God's wisdom found a way to bring them congruently together. It involved a cross."⁴³

This is what is meant by 'holy sacrifice'. In the end it is not a question of the balancing of attributes or the juggling of categories: it is the inseparable presence in the personal being of God of the loftiest moral qualities we can conceive. Holy sacrifice can only be the work of holy God. It is the presence of holy God in the cross that bodies forth there what James Denney described: "grace establishing the law, not in a 'forensic' sense, but in a spiritual sense; mercy revealed, not over judgment, but through it; justification disclosing not only the goodness but the severity of God; the Cross inscribed, God is love, only because it is inscribed also, The wages of sin is death."⁴⁴

⁴³ Oden: *The Word of Life*, 349.

⁴⁴ James Denney: *Studies in Theology*, (London : Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), 124.