



**ATONEMENT AND NEW LIFE:
CONTOURS FOR THEOLOGY
IN DESPERATE SITUATIONS**

**EXPIAÇÃO E VIDA NOVA:
CONTORNOS PARA A TEOLOGIA
EM SITUAÇÕES DE DESESPERANÇA**

Pieter Verster

Diretor do Departamento de Missiologia da Faculdade de Teologia da University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, África do Sul. Doutor em Missiologia e Ciências da Religião (1984) e em Dogmática e Ética Teológica (1989) pela Universidade de Pretória, África do Sul.

E-mail: versterp.hum@ufs.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The two-thirds world faces serious challenges. Africa is beset by problems such as poverty and illness, bad governments, power struggles, globalisation and religious struggles. The atonement of Christ, in which reconciliation with God is possible, opens up new horizons for continents in despair. The meaning of Christ's death from the perspective of the atonement includes substitution, participation, and inspiration for new life. The love of God is explained in the atonement, which sees the world as the reason for which God sacrificed His Son. From this perspective, new hope for Africa and others continents is possible.

KEYWORDS

Africa; Atonement; Reconciliation; Substitution; Hope.

RESUMO

Dois terços do mundo enfrentam sérios desafios. A África é importunada por problemas como pobreza e doença, desgovernos, lutas por poder, globalização e conflitos religiosos. A expiação de Cristo, na qual a reconciliação com Deus é possível, descortina novos horizontes para continentes em desespero. O significado da morte de Cristo com base na perspectiva da expiação inclui substituição, participação e inspiração para uma vida nova. O amor de Deus é demonstrado na expiação, que vê o mundo como a razão pela qual Deus sacrificou Seu filho. Sob essa perspectiva, é possível uma nova esperança para a África e para outros continentes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

África; Expiação; Reconciliação; Substituição; Esperança.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are many similarities between Africa and South America. A difficult transition to a more open democratic society characterised by the high premium it places on human rights, is still under way. Poverty is a universal phenomenon, and in many instances it is uncertain whether a better economic situation is possible. The pressure of globalisation places many heavy burdens on Africa and South America, and a great deal of uncertainty still exists regarding the future.

However, new signs of hope are also present. There are those who see a new future, with democratic institutions and better living standards for all. For many, however, the socio-economic situation remains very uncertain, presenting numerous challenges. South America and Africa need new inspiration for a new future.

The question asked in this article is whether the church, by proclaiming the Gospel and especially by living according to the doctrine of atonement, can in any way provide such a new future for people in desperate situations. Can the doctrine that Jesus yielded himself on the cross as a substitute for sinners in any way still be relevant for the challenges faced by continents in despair?

2. THE CHALLENGES OF THE TWO-THIRDS WORLD FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Meredith (2006, p. 681) writes:

In reality, fifty years after the beginning of the independence era, Africa's prospects are bleaker than ever before. Already the world's poorest region, it is falling further and further behind all other regions of the world. Its average per capita national income is one-third lower than the world's next poorest region, South Asia. Most African countries have lower per capita incomes now than they had in 1980 or, in some cases, in 1960.

The African continent is beset by serious problems.

2.1. POVERTY AND ILLNESS

Poverty is still rampant in many parts of the two-thirds world, and especially in Africa. Statistics show that large parts of Africa lack the necessary infrastructure to support development and expedite the eradication of poverty. Van der Walt (2003, p. 40) points out that, in 1990, 170 million Africans were victims to chronic hunger. This figure increased in subsequent years. A very dangerous development is that, in some parts where prospects were good, a reversal of fortunes has taken place and poverty has become endemic, as in Zimbabwe. Meredith (2006, p. 682) explains how HIV/Aids is destroying millions in Africa, especially in Southern Africa. According to Meredith (2006, p. 682), by 2004 some 20 million had died from Aids and 30 million were infected, with an estimated 3 million new cases each year (see also VAN DER WALT, 2003, p. 40). The challenge posed by migration is particularly evident in Africa, which is a continent on the move. Serious problems linked to mass migration are also present (TIENDA et al., 2006).

2.2. GOVERNMENTAL PROBLEMS

Poverty and lack of good government go hand in hand. Over the years, Africa has been characterised by dictators, one-party states and military regimes. This has changed in some instances, but not across the total spectrum. Van der Walt (2003, p. 43) writes: “The political situation in Africa is bleak indeed, deeply worrying and should be unacceptable to every African.” The continent still suffers much due to extremely bad governments and undemocratic rulers. Meredith (2006, p. 686) explains:

But for the most part, Africa has suffered grievously at the hands of its Big Men and its ruling elites. Their preoccupation, above all, has been to hold power for the purpose of self-enrichment.

Ayittey (1999, p. 47) agrees: “The leadership in much of Africa has not only been a hopeless failure, but also a

disgrace to black people.” This opens the door to a new imperialism – in fact, there is a significant danger that Africa and other two-thirds world countries may become totally dependent again (BIEL, 2000, p. 258 ff.).

2.3. POWER STRUGGLES

Power struggles call for a new approach to Africa’s problems. Ethnicity lies at the root of these power struggles, which culminate in war and violent clashes – sometimes even genocide, as in Rwanda/Burundi and the Darfur region. Although these problems are often blamed on external factors and seldom on internal problems, internal shortcomings are a reality (AYITTEY, 1999, p. 45 ff.).

2.4. GLOBALISATION

Africa remains a continent exploited by the major economies of the world (BUTHELEZI, 2006, p. 56 ff.). In many instances, globalisation has not benefited Africa. Africa’s rich mineral sources are very often exploited – where the West left off, China and Russia entered. In addition, the West sadly lags far behind in fulfilling its promises of aid (cf. MEREDITH, 2006, p. 686).

2.5. RELIGIOUS CHALLENGES

The religious diversity in Africa holds the key to many wars. Uncertainty regarding the place of religion in society sometimes leads to problems. Religious intolerance is also a very serious problem (VAN DER WALT, 2003, p. 53), and churches often continue to support corrupt and oppressive regimes (cf. VAN DER WALT, 2003, p. 45).

2.6. LACK OF HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Meredith (2006, p. 686) provides little hope for the future:

But even given greater Western efforts, the sum of Africa's misfortunes – its wars, its despotism, its corruption, its droughts, its everyday violence – presents a crisis of such magnitude that it goes beyond the reach of a foreseeable solution.

2.7. POSITIVES IN THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

Africa is not all gloom. There is richness in the community life of Africa's peoples – a community life that is characterised by respect, honour and general acceptance of one another. Van der Walt writes (1994, p. 181):

In the traditional African society, there are also all sorts of character traits with which the children are imbued from their childhood onwards. The ideal person, in the African view, is somebody who reveals such virtues as being peace-loving, friendly, forgiving, having appreciation and respect for each other.

There is a resilience to continue amid hardship, a deep sense of spirituality. Suggestions for a future in which Africa fulfils its potential are made in the book of Makgoba (1999) on the African Renaissance. Various authors suggest that Africa has the potential to reinvent itself and create a new future (MAKGOBA, 1999). Buthelezi (2006, p. 79 ff.) sees the possibility that Africa can recover economically and develop in a positive way.

3. THE ATONEMENT: GOD'S PROVISION FOR A WORLD IN NEED

God provided for the world – He did not leave the world to its own devices. In the atonement of Jesus Christ,

reconciliation with God is possible. The central message of the Gospel is that Jesus died for our sins, and was resurrected (MARSHALL, 2004, p. 266). This reconciliation opens up totally new beginnings. This is where we should begin to seek a new future for the two-thirds world.

3.1. THE MEANING OF CHRIST'S DEATH

Christ Jesus's death on the cross is explained in the atonement. On the cross, the atonement became a reality. The death of the One has implications for the many. Witherington 111 (1998, p. 248) writes:

Christ's story is the crucial hinge in the whole human drama (as Wright stresses), which indicates how the story will end. Paul is able to retell this story in many other creative forms (e.g. Col 1:15-20), but the essence of the story is the same: a pre-existent divine Son of God who stooped to conquer. The means of triumph was not just taking on the form of a servant, but also dying a slave's death on the cross and then being vindicated by God through the resurrection (cf. Rom 1:3-4).

In His death, the death of a slave, Christ immediately reaches out to the world of people who have no own merit. Through his vicarious death, however, He transforms the person without merit into a being of tremendous value in God's eyes.

3.1.1. THE DEATH OF CHRIST AND SUBSTITUTION

In His death, Christ acts as a substitute for many. Through His life, He changes the lives of many others. The death of the many becomes His death. His death becomes the life of the many. This is closely linked to the view that the death of Christ is a sacrifice. Through the sacrifice and the substitution in the sacrifice, Christ brings about the atonement (cf. McGRATH, 2001, p. 411). Theologically this is still relevant

and applicable, but since the Second World War theologians have tried to downplay the importance of the sacrifice in the interests of sociological and political correctness (McGRATH, 2001, p. 414). The essence of substitution must, however, not be overlooked. The Scriptures emphasise substitution as the road to salvation.

God, in His righteousness, turns to humans for their salvation. This means that the terrible reality of sin must be acknowledged. Guthrie (1981, p. 466) emphatically states:

God could never curse his Son, but since he has already pronounced a curse on sin, his Son could not avoid the implications of this if he identified himself with man's sin. At this point we are undoubtedly faced with a mystery, but we nevertheless cannot fail to see the substitutionary implications of statements like 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 3:13.

Seeking merit is out of the question. Bruce (1977, p. 328): elaborates on how God's mercy is evident in Paul's view on this aspect:

What Jews and Gentiles need alike, in fact, is to have their records blotted out by an act of divine amnesty and to have the assurance of acceptance by God for no merit of their own, but by his spontaneous mercy. For this need God has made provision in Christ. Thanks to his redemptive work, men may find themselves "in the clear" before God; Christ is set before them in the gospel as the one who by his self-sacrifice and death has made full reparation for their sins. The benefits of the atonement thus procured may be appropriated by faith – and only by faith. Thus God, without abandoning his personal righteousness, accepts all believers in Jesus as righteous in his sight, regardless of whether they are Jews or Gentiles.

The universal love of God and His most wonderful turning towards humans are stated clearly. He is reaching out to humans in His fullness. He is God in the justification of sinners. He is God in the total redemption of people in need.

Brown (1997, p. 577) explains:

“Justification” is also used by Paul to describe an effect worked in those who believe what God has done in Christ. Since God acquitted people in judgement, they were now justified. This acquitting took place not because people were innocent but because, although they were sinners, the truly innocent Jesus was himself made sin for the sake of others (11 Cor. 5:21). By an act of love, Christ died for sinners (Rom 5:8)...

In the innocence of Jesus, new life is possible. He is the One of justice and righteousness, and brings about totally new life through His substitution.

3.1.2. THE DEATH OF CHRIST AND PARTICIPATION

Through participation in the death of Christ, life with Christ is possible. This participation is the death of the sinner so as to become a new person in Christ. Participation is only possible through the atonement.

Goppelt (1982, p. 105-106) explains:

His dying and rising, however, were of course present in a determining way in the exalted One who was at work through the Spirit. He laid hold of the individual through proclamation, pointedly through baptism. Thus, “in Christ” were those who through baptism had been taken into his body, the community of faith, and through his action were exposed to the activity of the Spirit through the word.

3.1.3. THE DEATH OF CHRIST AND INSPIRATION FOR NEW LIFE

From His death, new life springs forth. Christ’s death in the atonement makes new life possible. He inspires the new

person to live a life with God. New possibilities for life are created. Christ's death on the cross was also a victory. This victory over sin, death and Satan creates the possibility of a new life (McGRATH, 2001, p. 415).

Westerholm (2004, p. 373 ff.) explains Paul's interpretation of the new life by referring to the fact that Christ's death on the cross was not to atone for inevitable shortcomings, but that all human beings live under the servitude of sin. Westerholm (2004, p. 373-374) then continues:

Their need is not for the forgiveness of incidental sins, but for an (apocalyptic!) transformation of the conditions of human existence: their life in sin's service must end, preferably in something other than their own (final) death. For believers in Christ this has happened: they have been (like Paul) "crucified with Christ", "dying", because of the death sentence that the law pronounced on their life in sin ("I died by the law", 2:19; cf. 3:10), but in the process experiencing the end of their old existence, regulated by the law, in sin's service ("I died to the law", 2:19). Now they may indeed live for God ("that I might live for God"), but only inasmuch as Christ, in whose crucifixion they have shared, is now the effective force in their lives ("I no longer live, but Christ lives in me", 2:20) (text from Romans-PV).

3.2. GOD'S LOVE AND THE ATONEMENT

In the atonement, God's love is present and clear. The love of God is not known unless it is explained in the atonement. God's love and His justice are both maintained in the atonement (ERICKSON, 2001, p. 104).

3.2.1. THE GOD OF LOVE YIELDED HIS SON

God gave His Son for the life of the church, but also for the sake of the world. God wanted the world to know His love, and His love is present in His Son. He yielded His Son

for our lives. Throughout the New Testament, a religion of redemption is presented (MARSHALL, 2004, p. 717). The only way in which we can understand the fullness of God as love is in His deed of self-sacrifice, His Son's death. This is how God is – He is absolute love in that He gave his son to die for sinners while they were still sinners.

Calvin (1960, p. 508) also explains explicitly that Christ was the One who fully obeyed God, yielding himself, wrestling with terrible fears and amid cruel torments – so that He could provide for us the sinners, yielding Himself totally to the Father's will.

This is the future with God. God opens up the new possibilities because He is the road to salvation. In electing Christ, He turned to humans to offer them redemption. Barth (1957, p. 161) puts it profoundly:

The eternal will of God in the election of Jesus Christ is His will to give Himself for the sake of man, as created by Him and fallen from Him. According to the Bible this was what took place in the incarnation of the Son of God, in His death and passion, in His resurrection from the dead. We must think of this as the content of the eternal divine predestination. The election of grace in the beginning of all things is God's self-giving in his eternal purpose. His self-giving: God gave – not only as an actual event but as something eternally foreordained – God gave His only begotten Son. God sent forth His own Word. And in doing so, He gave Himself. He gave Himself up. He hazarded Himself. He did not do this for nothing, but for man, as created by Him and fallen away from Him.

Although Calvin (1960, p. 506) places great emphasis on the fact that God hates sin and that we are therefore under the curse of God, he also explicitly explains the love of God:

Since there is a perpetual and irreconcilable disagreement between righteousness and unrighteousness, so long as we remain sinners he cannot receive us completely. Therefore, to take away all cause for enmity and to reconcile us utterly to himself, he wipes out all evil in us by the expiation set forth in the death of Christ; that we, who were previously unclean and impute,

may show ourselves righteous and holy in his sight. Therefore, by his love, God the Father goes before and anticipates our reconciliation in Christ. Indeed, because he first loved us [1 John 4:19], he afterwards reconciles us to himself.

According to Calvin, this is only possible in Christ for the believer.

3.2.2. THE GOD OF LOVE IS LOVE IN THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE ATONEMENT

In His love, God accepts the atonement of His Son for the sin of the world. God accepts and proclaims the life of the church in Christ. He reaches out in His love in Christ, but also establishes the relationship of love in the atonement. This does not mean that God requires the death of His son to calm His wrath, but rather that God is righteous and that sin had to be atoned for so that humans could be reconciled with God. The problem lies with humans, and not with God. He is love manifested in the atonement.

3.2.3. THE GOD OF LOVE ESTABLISHES NEW POSSIBILITIES OF HOPE IN THE ATONEMENT

Hope is radical and new in the atonement. God opens up new possibilities of hope because the atonement means total reconciliation. God is the One who re-establishes the future of humans through the atonement. In Him, through His love, the future becomes a future of hope. He opens up new possibilities through His involvement in the plight of humans, precisely by bringing them into a relationship of hope.

Although Küng's (1980, p. 695) view on Jesus as proclaiming the love of God does not take the atonement into consideration, it does affirm the wonder of God's love in Christ:

I can rebel against an abstract justice of God and against a universal harmony preestablished for the present or postulated for the future. But not against the love of the Father of the abandoned, made manifest in Jesus, in its unconditional boundlessness embracing also my suffering, reducing my indignation to silence, overcoming my frustration and making it possible for me to endure all the continuing distress and finally to be victorious.

The atonement must not be evaluated as something abstract, but as real reconciliation and love in Jesus. The Father of Christ to whom Küng refers is the Father showing His love through the atonement, and it should therefore not be regarded as contradictory to Küng's reference.

3.2.4. THE GOD OF LOVE IS THE GOD OF THE FUTURE

The eschatological aspect of the Gospel is of great significance. God is love in the wonderful open future He creates for humans. This open future is made possible in Jesus Christ, through the atonement. The atonement makes the future possible. People living in sin can now become new people with a vision of a new future with God. This new future is made possible in the new creation of God, which follows on the atonement. Love is now a possibility for humans too, for they can love in the love from God. Barth (1958, p. 753) makes a profound statement in this regard:

He loves on this basis in God, as one who is called and impelled by God to do so by the fact that He has disclosed Himself and is known as the One who first loves, and first loves *him*, in the glory and majesty of His divine essence. It is for this reason, in response to the Word in which God loves him and tells him that He loves him, in correspondence to it, that the Christian may and must and will also love.

3.3. THE WORLD IN NEED IS ACCEPTED BY GOD IN THE ATONEMENT

The world in its terrible need is accepted by God. In accepting Christ, God also opens the world to Himself – Col 1.

3.3.1. THE WORLD REVEALED IN THE ATONEMENT

The world is revealed for what it really is in the atonement – a world with no answer to sin. Only God can change the world from an enemy to a friend. The world cannot fulfil the deep need of humans. Only God can reveal the need and supply an answer.

3.3.2. THE WORLD BROUGHT INTO A NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

The world is now brought into a new relationship with God. The entire creation is called into this new life. In Christ and through faith, people can become God's new creation in the world. The people of faith also act as salt in the world, and the world becomes new.

3.3.3. THE WORLD RENEWED THROUGH THE ATONEMENT

The new world is made possible in Jesus Christ. He is the One who touches the entire world, and brings about a totally new beginning. Now there is hope and a future, even for the world in general.

4. CONTINENTS OF DESPAIR OR CONTINENTS OF HOPE

4.1. AFRICA AND HOPE

In the atonement and God's yes for the world, a total change is possible. There is hope, even in desperate situations.

- God must be honoured for His love in the atonement, and exalted for His unconditional outreach to humans.
- Christ must be followed as the One for others, who gave Himself so that people could be reconciled fully with God.
- The renewal of Christ through the Holy Spirit must be accepted and realised in the community.
- The church must be the sign of hope in Jesus, who established the church through the atonement.

Beker (1990, p. 116) writes:

Moreover, the notion of a definite victory of God over the power of death stimulates a contingent ethic of solidarity, not only because both Christians and the world are still subject to the power of death, but also because the last judgement will demand from Christians a final accountability of their stewardship over God's creation and in the manner in which they have exercised their solidarity with the world.

4.2. A MESSAGE FROM AFRICA

Africa can become a continent of hope when the church displaying phenomenal growth functions as the community of the new, atoned people of God. When the church begins to

act according to its beliefs, the world can change again. This message must, however, be profoundly entrenched in the atonement. Only in the atonement of Christ is new life possible. A new world is only possible if the church starts to live in accordance with the life of Christ, and in a new life with Him. At grass-roots level, the church can inspire the community as represented in the family structure to become totally new. The Church can, however, also inspire Christian life and ethics in all aspects of community life.

CONCLUSION

For the continents of Africa and South America, a new future is possible in the atonement because it is God showing His love for a world He does not leave in the lurch. The church has the calling to live a totally new life for God within these circumstances. The world is not alone – God did not reject the world, but brought about total redemption in Christ. Therefore there is hope, but this hope must radically be found in Christ and in His atonement.

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