

“Jesus’s Death on the Cross Matters—But Not Because He Paid for Our Sins”

. . . this is the payment understanding of Jesus’s death, also known as the ‘substitutionary’ or ‘satisfaction’ understanding of the cross. (132)

Yes, I was there. I was implicated in his death. My sins helped put him there. That’s why he had to die. (132)

A hundred years ago, the substitutionary understanding of his death was named as one of the five *fundamentals* of Christianity. (133)

The payment understanding has great power:

Jesus loves you so much that he died for you.

You matter so much to God that God gave up God’s Son for you.

Your sins are forgiven and you are accepted, no matter how unworthy you think you are. (134)

. . . payment understanding is seriously deficient and even can be dangerous, especially when it is proclaimed as *the* meaning of Jesus’s death . . . often distorts, even destroys, what Christianity is about, the heart of the Christian message. (134)

. . . It is not central in the first thousand years of Christian belief. (135)

. . . first fully articulated in 1098 by . . . Anselm (1033-1109). (135)

If God were to forgive sins without payment for disobedience, it would suggest that sin doesn’t matter very much to God. (135)

That it was not central to the first thousand years of Christianity is confirmed by its absence in Eastern Christianity. (136)

The payment understanding . . . generates serious theological problems:

It makes Jesus's death part of God's plan of salvation.

It emphasizes the wrath of God toward sin and [contends] that God's wrath must be satisfied and that Jesus's death did that.

Because it makes the death of Jesus the most important thing about him, it obscures the importance of his life and message and activity before death.

It makes "believing" that Jesus died to pay for our sins more important than "following" him. . . . It even creates what an evangelical critic of the payment understanding has called "vampire Christians"—that is, Christians interested in Jesus primarily for his blood and not much else. (137)

[Jesus's] challenge to the authorities is seen in the heart of his message and activity: the coming of 'the kingdom of God.' (139)

Equally striking are Jesus's first words: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near." (139)

. . . "the kingdom of God" was not about an afterlife . . . but about the transformation of life here on *earth*. (140)

Jesus's entry proclaimed that his message was about a kingdom, the kingdom of God, in which there would be peace, not war—a kingdom not based on violence. (141)

Does it matter that Jesus was executed by the authorities rather than dying because of compassion for victims of a death-dealing contagion? (142)

Good Friday and Easter have a political meaning, even as they also have a more-than-political meaning. The payment understanding not only obscures, but [also] negates the political meaning of Jesus's life and execution and vindication by God. (143)

In each case, what is emphasized is not that Jesus will die in Jerusalem for our sins, but that the authorities will kill him. (144)

The gospel was an anti-imperial vision of what the world should be like. (144)

The cycle of death and resurrection, dying and rising, is a classic archetype of personal transformation. (145)

Personal transformation is about dying to an old identity. . . . Dying and rising, being born again, means entering into a new identity and way of being, now centered in God, in Christ, in the Spirit. . . . (148)

“The Bible is Political”

. . . much of the Bible is political in the sense of being a radical critique of such systems and advocacy of another way of putting our common life together, all in the name of God. (148)

. . . the Bible and Christianity have often been used to legitimate the political status quo. . . . Emperors and kings were crowned in the name of God. . . . obedience to God included obedience to earthly rulers. (149)

American Christianity has been shaped by a reaction to this history. (149)

Jesus did not teach that religion and politics were separate, and Paul did not advocate unconditional obedience to political authority. (151)

. . . for the past few decades, beginning around 1980, the most visible American Christian involvement in politics has come from “the Christian Right.” Their political issues have not been about war and peace or civil rights, but primarily about personal behavior and belief. Most are about sexuality and gender: abortion, gay marriage, pornography, the role of women, and for some, contraception. The belief issues are most obvious in their determination to counter evolution with creationism, their passion for prayer in public schools, and their concern to preserve Christian displays in public places, such as the Ten Commandments in schools and courtrooms and Christmas crèches and crosses.

But these are not the political issues of the Bible. In the Bible, the political issues--which are also religious—are about economic justice and fairness, peace and nonviolence. (152)

. . . premodern domination systems—

were ruled by a few . . . 90 percent or more had no voice in how the system was structured

were economically exploitative

were chronically violent

were legitimated by religion

This was the world of the Bible. . . . The Bible from beginning to end is a sustained protest against the domination systems of the ancient world. (154-155)

Hebrew laws . . . also include some of the most radical economic principles in human history—

Every family was to have its own piece of agricultural land

Agricultural land could not be bought or sold

Debt was not entered into lightly

No interest was to be charged on debts

Every seventh year (the Sabbath year), all debts were to be forgiven, and indentured slaves were to be set free

[land could be lost through foreclosure for debt}. Thus the law of Jubilee: every fiftieth year, all agricultural land was to be returned to the original family of ownership, without compensation. (156-157)

. . . Samuel, the last of the judges of Israel, warns those who wanted a king what would happen under a monarchy. Note the repeated “he will take” and the concluding “you shall be his slaves.” (158)

. . . Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and so forth, were voices of radical protest against the economic injustice and violence of what was now a native domination system. *159)

Micah: *“God has told you, O mortal, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”* (160)

The commercialization of agriculture and the monetization of the economy resulted in the creation of large estates [called *latifundia*—owned by the state often, they were like plantations, and Rome’s conquered slaves and the poor ejected from family farms labored on them]. Land was increasingly used to produce crops for sale and export. (161)

What this meant in its historical context: it’s Caesar’s coin—give it back to him. But give to God what is God’s. And what belongs to God? The text does not answer this question, but the answer is obvious: everything belongs to God. (164)

Not every Christian is called to be an activist. But all are called to take seriously God’s dream for a more just and nonviolent world. (167)