

Sprunger

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JAN 7 1981

URANTIA

January 4, 1981

Mr. Thomas A. Kendall
URANTIA Foundation
533 Diversey Parkway
Chicago, IL 60614

Dear Tom:

Enclosed is a copy of a short paper on the atonement doctrine. Although this is not a problem with mainline ministers, some laymen in nonfundamentalistic churches are still bothered by the atonement doctrine. In response to a request by Cap Van Valkenburg for a presentation explaining the deficiencies of the atonement doctrine, I composed this paper.

One of the versions enclosed uses quotes from The URANTIA Book. Although the number of words quoted are less than the traditional "250 words" often cited as within the fair use aspect of the law, I thought you might prefer to give permission for the quote if I should use this version.

From experience I know that people sometimes write asking about the atonement doctrine; so, I'm sending a copy to John in case he should wish to use it or ideas it might suggest in answer to these questions.

We send our best wishes to you and all of the folks at 533 Diversey Parkway for a joyous and invigorating year in 1981.

Cordially,

M. J. Sprunger

Meredith J. Sprunger

Dearest John:

You may use the enclosed paper on the atonement in any way you might wish.

Warm regards,

Meredith

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THE ATONEMENT DOCTRINE

Meredith J. Sprunger

URANTIA

A literal blood atonement doctrine has been abandoned and refuted by the theologians and ministers of mainline Christianity many years ago. But what is taught in theological seminaries often takes generations to filter down to the average layman.

The atonement doctrine which was held by orthodox Christians in the Middle Ages states that it was necessary for the Son of God to be sacrificed to satisfy a righteous and holy God and thereby make it possible for him to accept and save sinful man. Man, the doctrine asserted, is justified by the blood sacrifice of Christ. In order to give rational credence to this doctrine theologians of the Middle Ages declared that God's righteousness and justice outranks and dominates his love and mercy.

This doctrine has its scriptural basis in the conceptual language of St. Paul. Paul coming out of the Jewish tradition and writing with Jewish people in mind used the symbolic idea of Christ as the "final sacrifice" as a missionary approach which made sense to those with a Jewish background.

New Testament scholars today recognize that Paul did not hold a God concept which would be compatible with a literal blood atonement doctrine. He used this sacrificial language because it was the only frame of reference which would be acceptable to the Jews of his day. It was a missionary attempt to relate to the thought patterns of the Jews.

The people of the Middle Ages accepted a literal blood atonement doctrine because it reflected their authoritarian, arbitrary value orientation and God concept. It is difficult for contemporary people to realize the callousness and brutality of the ethical-political behavior of even some church officials of this era. The legal courts allowed the rich and powerful to escape punishment for crimes by permitting another person (for hire or debt payment) to serve their sentences. This substitutionary justice readily transferred in their religious thinking to a substitutionary atonement doctrine.

The Renaissance and Reformation brought the fresh air of enhanced intellectual, moral, and spiritual thinking. It was soon recognized that substitutionary legal justice was unacceptable and laws were changed. As the modern age evolved theologians also observed that a literal blood atonement theory was incompatible with Jesus' teaching about the nature of God the Father. The atonement theory slanders and brutalizes the attributes of God. It was further pointed out that God's love is not dominated by his righteousness or holiness.

Mainline Christian theologians for these and other sound philosophic and scriptural reasons have long since rejected a literal blood atonement doctrine. I recall attending the Indiana State Pastor's Conference some twenty years ago when Dr. George A. Butterick, who taught at the Harvard Divinity School, was speaking. During one of the breaks in the program I asked Dr. Butterick how he responded to ministers who still believed in the doctrine of atonement. He looked at me in bewilderment and with a smile said, "I didn't know any were in existence anymore!"

The Bible commentary most widely used in America today is The Interpreter's Bible published by Abingdon Press. In volume VIII, p. 510-11, the writer in commenting on John 3:16 says, "Some of the past explanations of the gospel are not overhelpful to us now. Most of us are not at home in the Jewish sacrificial system; and metaphors drawn from it can be confusing rather than illuminating. And some of the interpretations, popular in the Middle Ages, are to us incredible, and even monstrous....So do many, with the Gospels in their hands, appear to see in them a lesser God giving himself to save us from the implacable fury and resentment of the great God, slow and hard to be appeased, and demanding his pound of flesh from someone. That is hideous heresy; and the blasphemy of blasphemies. It was in the eternal plan of God the Father that Jesus Christ lived out into fact: 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself' (II Cor. 5:19), not standing sullenly aside, and needing himself to be reconciled."

Finally, we should point out that those who still accept a literal blood atonement doctrine in our day probably do so out of misunderstanding or ignorance. To believe that God the Father cannot or will not love man until his innocent Son is brutally executed is a cruel distortion of the loving nature of God Jesus revealed to man. Even thinking fundamentalists shrink from such a demeaning understanding of our loving Heavenly Father. But, like all distortions of truth and ignorance of fact and value, it takes time to outlive decadent doctrines and see them for what they are.

Positive spiritual values associated with the atonement doctrine which are preserved and augmented by mainline Christianity and The URANTIA Book are the following:

1. It was the Father's will that Jesus allow the Jewish leaders to dispose of him as they desired - even if this resulted in his death. Jesus accepted the Father's will and of his own volition allowed the evolutionary situation to take its course without the intervention of divine power. The Father and the Son allow man to shape his own destiny even if they must suffer.
2. Jesus' death on the cross demonstrates his and his Father's profound love for man even when they are torturing and executing him. He refused to use his divine power to save himself or punish these misguided evil doers. This great love is the most powerful saving act the Father and the Son could do to save self-willed man from his ignorance, evil, and sin and cause man to recognize God's love and accept salvation.
3. Salvation is something which God in Christ makes possible for man. Man cannot save himself although through faith he may accept this gift of salvation. Christ is the way by which man goes to the Father.

See The URANTIA Book p. 60.

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