God does not demand blood: The cross and divine charity

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Cover Story

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Christians have never embraced blood sacrifice. We have not offered chickens or slain goats, let alone sacrificed our firstborn children to God. Indeed, the very idea of blood sacrifice is abhorrent to us, evoking an almost involuntary visceral reaction. It sends chills down our spines and stirs deep within us a strong impulse to act against such a horrific practice.

But although Christians have never practiced blood sacrifice, the logic of blood sacrifice often shapes the way Christians think about God and, consequently, how we act in the world. From fire-and-brimstone sermons like Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" to a T-shirt sporting an image of Christ crucified with the caption "His Pain, Our Gain" to Mel Gibson's blockbuster movie *The Passion of the Christ*, Christianity is permeated with images of a wrathful, angry God who demands blood and suffering and threatens to inflict terrible violence as the just punishment for sin.

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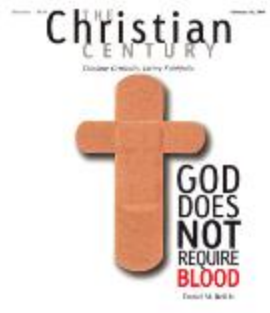

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Furthermore, as Christians seek to witness faithfully to God in the world, they reinforce the logic of blood sacrifice whenever they appeal to their interpretation of the divine example to justify or defend social and political practices that draw blood or endorse suffering. God sets the precedent for the necessity of blood and the appropriateness of redemptive violence and suffering in setting things right. Whether it is to defend capital punishment and war, as evangelical scholar J. Daryl Charles does; to encourage impoverished peasants to endure their affliction, as Martin Luther did; or to "comfort" battered spouses, as too many pastors continue to do, God is lifted up as the ultimate sanction and source of redemptive violence.

All of this is wrong. God does not demand or require blood to redeem us. God neither inflicts violence nor desires suffering in order to set the divine–human relation right. In spite of its pervasiveness in Christian imagery, the cost of communion, of reconciliation and redemption, is not blood and suffering.

Of course, not every sanction for bloodshed or suffering is a matter of blood sacrifice. Violence that is gratuitous, for example, is not. Neither are bloodshed and suffering that are solely sadistic or purely vindictive. What I mean by the logic of blood sacrifice is the notion of *redemptive violence*. As it was practiced in at least some ancient cultures, blood sacrifice was about violence and suffering as a means of restoring, protecting and preserving the order of things. When things got out of order due to human transgression, blood sacrifice was offered to appease the gods and restore that order. Violence was redemptive. We see and hear that message reinforced all around us: violence secures, violence redeems. Good violence is the only thing that can save us from bad violence.

Since September 11, 2001, we have been told that the only way to protect and preserve our life and lifestyle from terrorism is by unleashing the violence of war on terror. Reason, goodwill and diplomacy will not save us. Freedom and democracy can be preserved from the violence of terrorism only by an overwhelming and relentless counterviolence that one pundit called "focused brutality." Those who doubt either the morality or the effectiveness of this redemptive violence are dismissed as not serious, or called liars and hypocrites or even terrorists. If this counterviolence means curtailing democracy and other freedoms, if it means locking up people indefinitely, rounding up their family members and torturing suspects, so be it. Our survival is at stake; this is what is required to save us.

On the domestic front, faith in redemptive violence is displayed in a variety of ways. In the wake of a recent shooting on a college campus in the state where I live, signs appeared on the side of the road urging people to "Vote Yes to Guns in Schools," and several bills to that end were introduced in the state legislature. On national airwaves easier recourse to violence was trumpeted as the solution to such horrible acts. These efforts are in line with social trends that stress "law and order," push for more police and prisons, and insist on more draconian prison conditions and an expansion of the death penalty.

Culturally, the message that violence saves is evident in movie theaters and on the television screen. The plot of countless shows and movies can be summed up as "People who use bad violence are pursued by people who use good violence, and in the end good violence saves the day." The paradigmatic example of this is the classic Western film *High Noon*, which reaches its climax as the pacifist character played by Grace Kelly comes to her senses and embraces violence to save her husband and the town. But every generation has its media icon of redemptive violence, from Dirty Harry and Rambo to the *Lethal Weapon* and *Die Hard* franchises to Jack Bauer of the hit TV show *24*. Although the names and faces change, the message is constant: only through violence is law and order maintained. Only violence saves us from the worst violence.

We reinforce the conviction that violence is redemptive in subtle and indirect ways. Consider how we lament the "culture wars" or praise the "war on drugs." In the not-too-distant past we waged a "war on poverty." We grieve someone losing his or her "battle" with cancer and talk about a "battle of the bulge" to counter childhood obesity. A local church calls a teaching series on interpersonal relations "Love Means War." A school administrator does not agree with the position a teachers' union takes and denounces its members as "terrorists." Infants and toddlers are decked out in military fatigues. The most popular video games revolve around apocalyptic levels of violence.

Thus far, we have considered how violence is thought to be redemptive in terms of its being inflicted upon others, but another side to our belief holds that sometimes it is redemptive to suffer violence. I may need to suffer or even die to save myself or others. While much of our popular discourse expresses a strong aversion to suffering, this undercurrent affirms suffering violence as a way to make things right.

This belief often comes to the fore when we are confronted with the problem of evil. Why do the innocent suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? Faced with the problem of suffering, victims and those who would console them frequently say that suffering violence can be cleansing, purgative or purifying. Most bluntly, some say that suffering is a means of paying for or being purged of one's sin. One suffers because one has sinned; one pays the price and thereby restores the moral order and ensures one's own redemption.

Another version of redemptive suffering neither blames the victim nor insists that we learn something from suffering; it simply holds that there is a compensation or reward attached to suffering violence. This message is sometimes presented to the poor and oppressed. An impoverished woman once told me that her church told her that her suffering on this earth was God's will, that she should not act or expect things to change and that she would be rewarded in heaven. The message is that suffering is either cleansing or compensatory.

One might interpret a group of white clergy's exhortation to Martin Luther King Jr. along the same lines. While he was in the Birmingham jail, King and his co-workers were told not to press for change so hard but to wait, to continue to suffer the violence of white supremacy. For doing so they would be compensated by the eventual end of white supremacy's reign.

Another form of this compensatory version of redemptive suffering, the free-will defense of suffering, is a bit more abstract. Innocent suffering is rewarded or redeemed by the surpassing goodness of the gift of free will. Granted, God could have eliminated the possibility of our suffering violence at the hands of others or ourselves if God had created us as robots without free will. But God gave us the gift of free will, and having free will necessarily entails the risk of suffering violence at the hands of either others or ourselves. Suffering violence is redemptive insofar as it is linked to and compensated or rewarded by a greater good.

The logic of all of this thinking is that violence saves. Whether it is a matter of inflicting violence on others to protect, preserve or restore the good and the right or of encouraging others to suffer violence for the sake of some redemptive benefit, the message that violence redeems is pervasive. But is it correct?

Maybe there is nothing wrong with believing that violence saves. After all, at the center of the Christian faith stands a profound act of violence—the cross. Wasn't this the supreme act of redemptive violence? Isn't it the case that in spite of our visceral reaction against blood sacrifice, Christ was the ultimate blood sacrifice? Isn't it true that, as an acquaintance remarked upon seeing Gibson's movie, Jesus saves because he suffered more violence than anyone?

The message of Gibson's movie, with its graphic display of the violence connected with Christ's work of redemption or atonement on the cross, is taught and preached in countless churches. I heard it growing up and have heard it repeated many times since then. The account is frequently called the satisfaction or substitutionary theory of atonement, and it is attributed to the medieval theologian Anselm. Its argument goes something like this: In the face of human sin, which is an offense against God's honor, God, as One who must uphold justice, cannot simply forgive sin but must enforce a strict rendering of what is due. Because sinful humanity cannot fulfill its debt, the God-man Christ steps forward and fulfills justice through his substitutionary death on the cross. Redemption is a result of the payment of a debt incurred through sin by means of a death that satisfies divine justice.

A slightly different theory, the governmental, replaces the notion of God's honor with the concept of the moral order of the universe. Here, sin is a rupture of that moral order. If God were merely to pardon or overlook that breach, then the moral order—right and wrong—would collapse. There would be no consequences for sin, and subsequently no incentive for people to live a moral life. Social life would be undermined as murder and other crimes would go unchecked. Hence, Christ suffers the violence of the cross and dies in order to uphold the integrity of moral order in the universe.

In the face of wrong, these theories tell us that only blood can set things right. Christ diverts the arrow of an angry deity's wrath by stepping in front of it and letting it plunge into his own body. Only the blood of the Lamb saves us from the fiery hell we so richly deserve.

One way to make the case that God does not demand blood is simply to reject the cross. Some reject out of hand any sense in which the cross of Christ is redemptive or central to the story of how God redeems in this world. Some appeal to love and argue that a God of love would not demand blood, and that therefore the traditional focus on sacrifice and the cross of Christ is in error. Some believe that the traditional account of Christ's atoning work is analogous to child abuse and say it has been used to sanction and legitimate all sorts of terrible practices down through history.

I believe any effort to make the case that God does not demand blood cannot simply skip over the cross but instead must pass right through it. This is the case not just because efforts to circumvent the cross jettison significant portions of scripture, but because discarding the cross and atonement undercuts the laudable goals of those who reject blood sacrifice.

Consider the temptation of Jesus in Luke 4. Because the devil is involved, we know that the proper thing for Jesus to do is to stand fast against the temptations. Unfortunately, our reflection typically stops there as we conclude that "because Jesus resisted temptation, so can and should we," or that Jesus is our buddy because he is like us, subject to temptation. We rarely go on to probe what is wrong with the devil's challenges.

The problem is this: while the path that the devil offers Jesus leads to good things—feeding the world, ruling the world, worship—it circumvents the cross. The Lukan passage suggests that it is the devil who wants a Jesus without a cross (see Nikos Kazantzakis's novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*). Why is the devil trying to get Jesus to take a short cut? After all, brutality and violence are the devil's thing. The devil should want Jesus to die on the cross instead of trying to get him to set it aside. What is it about Christ's work that would be fatally flawed, to the point that he would be worshiping the devil, if he were to take the shortcut and skip Golgotha?

Consider Martin Luther King's advocacy of redemptive suffering. At first glance, King seems to encourage suffering and declares that it can be redemptive. Isn't this a perfect example of blood sacrifice? But if King and his followers had not proceeded to risk and then endure suffering, and had heeded the calls to set aside the cross, how much tighter might be the bonds of white supremacy today?

What these two cases suggest is that circumventing the cross may not lead to the desired results—the end of bloodshed, suffering and violence. If Luke 4 is anything to go by, we should be suspicious of claims that the desired end can be attained by avoiding the cross. As King realized, rejecting suffering may cut the nerve of the faithful engagement needed to overcome suffering and blood sacrifice.

I believe that Christ's work of atonement, when rightly understood, demands the rejection of blood sacrifice and the logic of redemptive violence. Christ's work on the cross is not about satisfying a divine demand for blood, but about showing us that God does *not* demand blood. Christ's work on the cross is the divine refusal of blood sacrifice, as well as any notion that

suffering violence is or can be redemptive. I am suggesting not that either Anselm or Paul was wrong, but that the dominant understanding of Christ's work as a blood sacrifice is a distortion of both Anselm and Paul. Read rightly, Anselm's account of how humanity is redeemed is not about diverting the arrows and appeasing the wrath of a bloodthirsty, angry god. Instead it is a story about the depths and lengths to which God goes so that we might share in the triune life of God (John 3:16).

According to Anselm, God became human not so that there might be a suitable object on which to vent the divine wrath, and not to meet the demands of an implacable moral order before which even God must bow, but so that humanity might be restored to the place of honor that God had intended for it from the beginning (2 Pet. 1:4). The atonement and Christ's work on the cross displays the fullness of divine charity, the lengths to which God will go to renew and restore communion with us even in the face of our bloody rebellion.

Christ is our substitute not in the sense that he takes our place in the execution chamber and suffers our punishment for us, but in the sense that he offers God the fidelity, devotion and obedience that we should have but did not, and subsequently could not. Paul holds a similar vision of Christ's work on the cross, although he too is often misread. It is commonplace to read the early chapters of his epistle to the Romans in terms of a blood sacrifice, as if Christ died because an angry god demanded blood as payment and punishment for human transgressions (cf. Rom. 3:25, 5:9). Such a reading profoundly distorts the good news that he preached and staked his life upon.

Consider a passage from another of Paul's letters: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself. . . . And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:5–8). Because we live in a world where the logic of blood sacrifice prevails, it is perhaps understandable that when we look at the cross, and even when we read scripture, it's the violence that catches our eye. But as Paul points out, it is not a blood sacrifice that saves us, but Jesus' obedience and fidelity.

In Romans 6, Paul responds to the congregation's question: Why should we trust God? Paul's answer is that God is just, and by this Paul means that God is faithful to God's promises. No one ever deserved the promise; it was always a matter of faith, with Jesus as the embodiment of God's faithfulness to the divine desire for communion and reconciliation. Jesus was obedient to this divine mission even when he faced human resistance and rejection in the form of the cross.

This love of God expressed in Jesus saves us. It is the love that would rather die on the cross than give up on us. We reject God, so God sends Jesus with the offer of life again and we reject it again; Jesus could have abandoned us, or called down fire from heaven to destroy us. But he did not. He remained faithful to his mission, reaching out to us until the end: "Father, forgive them . . ."

As we are joined to Christ and made part of his body, we are not somehow submitting to the logic of blood sacrifice. We are not simply being let off the hook for our sin by deflecting the punishment for that sin onto someone else. We are not satisfying an angry god by throwing that god a piece of innocent red meat. We are not offering a bloody sacrifice for the sake of reinforcing how important the moral law and order are.

Rather, as we are joined to Christ we become transformed (sanctified) and live our lives according to another logic. As Paul wrote, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Jesus Christ." The point is that in Christ we are not just pardoned but are also healed of our sin and made a different kind of people, a new creation, who live by a different logic. We love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We forgive, as we have been forgiven. We renounce violence as a means of defending or securing or saving ourselves or those we love. To the extent that our savior is Christ, our defense, security and salvation depend on Christ and the love that overcomes enemies. We live out the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17-20).

This way of life may entail enduring suffering—not because suffering is in some way good or redemptive, not because this is what God wants or because it is punishment for our sin. Rather, it is because suffering is the cost that humans in their sinful rebellion impose on other humans. Moreover, being prepared to suffer does not mean that we must seek out suffering or passively endure it. The logic of our new way of life does not reject justice, accountability or discipline; this way of life is disciplined and accountable and seeks justice. It may include practices such as incarceration or even just war. But justice and discipline shaped by the charity and mercy of God are significantly different from the so-called justice and discipline that belong to the law and order of blood sacrifice.

All around, the children of Cain are spilling blood and spreading suffering, planting fields of crosses. All the while, they insist that this is what God demands—bloody retribution for sin. But in the midst of their frenetic warring and cross making, they do not notice God, battered and broken, who is hanging on one of those crosses. God hangs there not because that is what he demands, but because he desires life even for those who crucify him. "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live" (Ezek. 18:32).

Tags:

- atonement
- cross
- sacrifice