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Did Jesus or Custer Die for Our Sins? Exploring the Mission of Covenant among Non-Western Indigenous Cultures (Chapter Five of Covenant-Making: The Fabric of Relationship)

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Exploring the Mission of Covenant among Non-Western Indigenous Cultures

Randy S. Woodley

Dr. Larry Shelton has become a good friend, close confidant and colleague. His interest in and promotion of North American Native theology has been clearly demonstrated over the past decade. Larry has attended most of our NAIITS (North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies) Symposia; created several important opportunities for dialogue; and somehow found a way to wrangle me into full-time academic work. I owe Larry a lot. I appreciate his keen theological mind, his irreverence for orthodoxy simply for orthodoxy's sake, and his Southern mountain humor. Larry always brings out the good ol' boy in me even when this ol' boy ain't so good. For Larry's friendship and the honor he has shown me, and our Indigenous work, I will always be grateful. A scholar, friend, and humorist—but above all—Larry is a real human being.

IN 1969 VINE DELORIA, Jr.'s famous book, *Custer Died for your Sins*, named after a bumper-sticker slogan, had just come out. At the time, as an 8th-grade Native American boy and wannabe activist, I read the book with great enthusiasm. It was easy for me to understand how such an evil man as George Armstrong Custer could be held up like Jesus as atonement for the whole nation of American White folks. After all the damage they had done to the Indigenous peoples of this land, my people, their sins were many. Later, when I was taught the ways of Christianity from a conservative Western worldview, it was easy for me to substitute Jesus, who practiced no evil, for Custer and conform to a simple "payment," transactionally oriented understanding of atonement. Unfortunately, both constructions I had in mind were in error. In his book *Cross and Covenant*, Larry Shelton lays waste to classic substitutionary atonement theories through a unique understanding of covenant that comes close to what might be considered Indigenous thinking. By doing so, he frees Indigenous North American Christians, and others, to understand naturally what Christ has done for us and all humanity.

For some White Americans, the imagery of Custer paying for the sins of White people may be offensive. But through Native American eyes, according to how God's love is portrayed in the Scriptures, it seems equally offensive to hold up Jesus, as representing penal substitutionary atonement or other related atonement theories. When the relationality of the trinity is explored, the love of God is realized as a great force with which to be reckoned, and Larry Shelton's understanding of relational covenant is such a model.

Peace and Covenant

The closest thing I know in Native American culture to the type of relational covenant, in the way Shelton portrays it, is a treaty, which usually includes both parties smoking what has formerly been referred to as a *Peace Pipe*. The term *Peace Pipe*, though, is a misnomer. The White man always saw the pipe used at these treaty ceremonies and through typical misinformation and poor assumptions, began to think of the pipe mainly in terms of Peace, thus, forever it seems, referencing it as a "Peace Pipe." In fact, the use of the pipe for most tribes is much more sacred than assumed by the White Men who made treaties with Native Americans. A more accurate description would be to call it a "Covenant Pipe."

Because the pipe is such a sacred object, it was most often used only in the most sacred ceremonies, the making of a covenant being one of those times. The pipe was used specifically during these times because it meant that two people, or people groups, who were likely at odds with one another for whatever reasons, were now becoming one. The covenant was indeed a marriage of sorts, which bound the two entities together from the time of the ceremony forever in intimate relationship.

The sacredness of such a powerful and revered symbol as the pipe assured the fact that no lies would be told to one another and that everyone's intentions would be pure.

The problem, of course, while making treaties between the United States and most Indian nations was that the Indigenous people were the only ones taking the covenant seriously. Most of the treaties forged between Indigenous Americans and the U.S. were forced under martial restraint, never intended to be kept or never intended to be enforced. With such a "tainted" history and superficial understanding of treaty, it is easy to recognize how Western Americans could miss understanding our relationship with the Creator in such covenantal and relational terms. Nonetheless, there is much we can learn theologically by doing so.

When two warring Indian nations came together in treaty, gifts were always exchanged. These gifts served as tokens of the relational covenant. The gifts were not trivial. Often, they were the best possessions a person held, including horses, pipes, and they may have even included inter-marriage and/or family adoptions. Such exchanges demonstrated the seriousness of the covenant and familial relationality. Notably, the commitment was not simply to serve as a means to end a war. No, treaty or covenant between most Indigenous American peoples meant, not just an absence of conflict, but instead, a whole new proactive time of peace and prosperity. The idea was that by working together, much more good could be done for all communities or entities involved. The construct very much resembles the ancient Jewish understanding of shalom, when a sensible and relational harmony that was broken was to be restored.

Traditionally, Native Americans understood our role on earth as those who restore harmony in very practical ways. Our indigenous ceremonies often require, not only symbolic acts but also practical restitution and full restoration. A vivid example of practical shalommaking is the ancient Cherokee cementation ceremony that occurred annually each fall. At that time anyone with grievance against a fellow Cherokee was required to participate in the ceremony.

The basic components of the ceremony included a fire and prayers that were spoken by the holy person. Then, the families and friends on each side of the rift would face each other with the lead persons (those with whom the division originated) at the head of the line. Each would give an account of the offense. Then the persons would go to the fire to pray for the strength to forgive. The two would then strip naked and exchange clothes. Following this action they spoke words of forgiveness and vowed never to bring the issue up again. The pipe was passed back and forth down the line for everyone to smoke. Finally, gifts were exchanged and a feast was put on by both parties for the whole community. The result was both ceremonial and practical.⁸⁶

Worth exploring, for the purposes of this chapter, was the public nature of covenant among Native Americans in ceremonies such as the one referenced above. Not only were all family members present, but the whole community came out to observe the ceremony and then they were hosted with a feast given by the restored families. For harmony or shalom to be restored, there must be some kind of a public record kept. Such records, symbolized by whatever was culturally appropriate, helped to ensure that if the animosity that once existed was ever brought up again, future generations would be able to tell the story of how the covenant was once made and it could avoid future misunderstandings and offenses. In the Indigenous ceremony of covenant, the whole community was often included in the restoration. The resultant symbols from such a covenant safeguarded the issue from becoming a festering point in later generations. I have heard stories of 200-year-old covenants between tribes told in both public and private settings.

As mentioned earlier, shalom seen simply as "peace" is an anemic understanding of a meta-narrative type of theological construct in the Scriptures. In fact, sometimes shalom even comes through creative, actionable conflict. For example, where injustice prevails, living out shalom covenant may dictate that the structure perpetuating the injustice be transformed through direct action. Certainly, wherever the weak are marginalized, or the poor, the disempowered, and the "ethnic other" are neglected, living out shalom covenant demands that someone challenge the oppressive system and lift up those who are being oppressed.

Sin and Covenant

Wherever shalom is broken, sin is present and it demands Christ's restoration, particularly if it be found in those who bear Christ's name. As one writer puts it, "God is for shalom and, therefore, against sin. In fact, we may safely describe evil as any spoiling of shalom, whether physically (e.g., by disease), morally, spiritually, or otherwise."⁸⁷ Sin, in a very real sense, can be defined as the absence of shalom. Sin without hope is the absence of a shalom-based, relational covenant.

As a result of the practicality of a relational shalom covenant, sin is neither ignored nor relegated to the private, more personal areas of life. Shalom makers clearly need to be active in the world, influencing society towards the vision of the Trinitarian community on earth, reflecting God's desire for everyone to dwell in the divine shalom covenant. Sin is brokenness

in harmony and it is an alienating force that works against God's vision for community. A relational shalom covenant does not assert unattainable utopian dreams without prescribing the means to a "peaceable kingdom" (Isa. 9:7; Rom. 14:17). Usually the terms are very clear, but not particularly legislative, and they are practical.

In such a construct of sin as held by some Native Americans, a penal substitutionary atonement has little meaning or place. Sin, to many Indigenous people, is not immutable nor is it related to guilt. A sin, to many traditional Native American understandings, is a mistake. We are neither forced to sin, nor is there some kind of idea of inherited guilt, nor do we need to continue making mistakes. Among Indigenous North Americans, there is no perfection for which one must strive. A good life comes by realizing we are limited and fallible human beings, and that realization is of the highest order of spirituality. Human beings seem to be the only part of creation that has difficulty remaining in its proper place in creation. Given this propensity to drift into anthropocentrism, indigenous peoples have many stories and ceremonies to remind us of our humanness.

The Interconnectedness of All Creation and Covenant

Larry Shelton originally hails from Cherokee country, so it is appropriate to share two stories from my own tribal traditions that shed light on shalom relational covenant. The first story deals with God's covenant and the gift of land to all creation. The second story sets humanity in right relationship with God and creation, especially revealing the interconnectedness of all creation.

Grandmother Turtle and How the Earth Was Made

When the earth was first made, it was covered all over with water except for one small island. This island was the top of a high mountain. This was Blue Mountain, in the Cherokee country. For the Cherokees, the Ani-Kituwa, the Ani-Yvwiya, this is where it all begins.

Everyone lived together on this mountaintop island. The human beings and the animals all got along fine. In those days they could understand one another's speech, for this was before the humans broke the harmony. The animals were also much bigger in those days. In fact, the animals of today are but shadows of those who once were. It was a good place to live. Sure, the island was small, but it was what everyone knew and was used to. All were content, until there came to be more of them than the small bit of land could support.

As they noticed they were getting crowded, a general council of all the people (both humans and animals) was called. The question was asked, "What can we do?" The only answer given was, "We can pray. All we can do is pray and ask the Grandfather Above to please give us some more land.

So all the people prayed, and Creator/Apportioner answered, "Oh my precious children, there is nothing I enjoy so much as giving good gifts to my children. But if I do everything for you without asking you to help in any way, how will you ever learn any responsibility? I really want to teach you some responsibility. Here's what I will do: If one of you will swim to the bottom of the ocean and bring up some mud, just a little bit of mud, I will take that mud, that little bit of mud, and make a whole great land of it."

All the people (animals and humans) began to look at one another. Someone asked, "Who will go? Who will get the mud?" A slow, deep voice answered, "I will go. I will get the mud." It was Grandma Turtle.

"Grandma Turtle, you can't go!" They said. "You're too old and slow. We don't know what it's like down there. We don't know how deep it is."

"I'll go," quacked Duck.

"Now that's more like it," they said. "You're a good swimmer, Duck. You can go; you can do it."

Duck paddled out onto the ocean and dived, but he popped right back up to the surface. Duck dived again and again and again, but the same thing happened each time. Well, you know how ducks are. They dive well, but they float much better. Duck paddled back to shore, shook the water off his tail and said, "I can't dive that deep. I float too well."

The question was asked again, "Who will go? Who will get the mud?"

Grandma Turtle said, "I will go. I will get the mud."

"Grandma Turtle," they said, "we settled that before! You can't go. You're too old. Who will go? Who will get the mud? Hey Otter, how about you?"

"What?" Otter said.

"How about you going to get the mud?"

"Mud? What mud?"

"The mud we need so Creator/Apportioner can make more land!"

"Oh, sure," said Otter, and he slid off into the water and was gone a good long while. When he came back, he had a fish in his mouth, but no mud. Without a word to anyone, Otter climbed up onto the beach and began munching on the fish.

Everyone was watching him, but Otter paid them no mind, just kept eating his fish. "Hey Otter!" someone yelled.

"What?" Otter said.

"Where's the mud?"

“Mud? What mud?” Otter asked. “Ohhh the mud! Well, I left here to go and get it. Then I got started playing. Then I caught this fish. Then I forgot all about the ummm, ummmm, whatever it was I was supposed to get.”

Oh my! They were nearly at their wits’ end. “Who will go?” they all asked. “Who will get the mud?”

Grandma Turtle said, “I will go. I will get the mud.” No one even paid her any mind.

“Who will go? Who will get the mud?”

“I will go,” said Beaver. “I will get the mud. I don’t play, and I do not eat fish.”

Resolutely, Beaver swam out into the ocean. He took a deep, deep breath and dived. Wow, Beaver was gone a long time. Some of the people watching and waiting were holding their breath in sympathy, but none seemed able to hold it that long. Finally, Beaver popped to the surface gasping for air. He swam to shore and climbed onto the beach shaking his head. “It’s too deep!” Beaver said. “I don’t know how deep it is. I never reached the bottom.”

Everyone was in despair. Beaver was the last best hope. How would they ever get mud? Maybe there would never be anything but the little mountaintop island. “Who will go?” they asked. “Who will get the mud?”

A slow deep voice answered, “I will go. I will get the mud.”

“You can’t go, Grandma Turtle, you’re too . . .”

“I WILL GO! I WILL GET THE MUD!”

There were no other volunteers, so they let Grandma Turtle go. She slowly paddled her way out onto the surface of the ocean. As everyone watched, she took a slow, deep breath, then another and another and another. She took three more breaths and disappeared beneath the water.

They waited a long time. Grandma Turtle was gone much longer than Duck or Otter or even Beaver had been. She was gone all that day and the next and the next. They posted a sentry up on the very top of the mountain. Finally, on the seventh day, the sentry called out, “I think I see something coming up. Yes, yes, something is rising in the water. Could it be? Could it be? Yes! It’s Grandma Turtle!”

Sure enough, Grandma Turtle rose to the surface of the ocean, and there she lay, not moving, with her legs, her tail, her head all hanging down . . . Grandma Turtle was dead.

Quietly, reverently, Duck, Otter and Beaver swam out and drew Grandma Turtle’s body to the shore. They pulled her up on the beach, as all the people (humans and animals) gathered sadly around, and what’s this? There, under her front feet, they found . . . mud.

Someone took the mud, that little bit of mud from under Grandma Turtle’s front feet, rolled it into a ball and lifted it up toward the sky. The Grandfather took that mud, that little bit of mud and cast it out, making this whole, great land that many nations call Turtle Island.⁸⁸

The Origin of Disease and Medicine

In the old days all the animals, birds, fish and plants could all talk, and everyone lived together in peace and friendship under the delight of the Creator. But after a while the people began to spread over the whole earth. The animals, birds, fish and plants found themselves beginning to be cramped for room. This was bad enough, but then Humans began to slaughter the animals needlessly, becoming wasteful. The humans no longer thanked the Creator for supplying food, nor did they thank the animals for feeding their families by the giving of their lives. Every traditional Cherokee knows that it is considered polite to thank the Creator and also thank the animal when it furnishes its own life so people may eat and sustain their lives for another day. So in order to protect themselves from the evil that had come upon them from the once grateful Cherokee, the animals resolved to hold a council to discuss their common survival.

The Council was first led by the bears. The Great White Bear asked, “how do the people kill us?” “With bows and arrows” someone replied. “Then we must make bows and arrows,” declared the leader. But soon the bears found they could not shoot straight with their claws, and they needed their claws to dig for grubs and such. After much debate, the animals decided to bring diseases upon the Cherokee people. The Cherokee people began getting sick and dying from these diseases. After many Cherokees had died they pleaded with the animals, “Please, we will become grateful and kill only that which we will eat.” But the animals would not take back the diseases they had created to kill the Cherokee.

At the same time, the plants were watching all of these things. They watched as the Cherokee children and old people got sick. Then the strong warriors and even the women began to die. The plants decided to hold a council. In the council they agreed to provide medicine for the Cherokee. Each night, as the Cherokees would sleep, the plants would come to them in their dreams and show them how to use the plants to heal the diseases that the animals had brought upon them.

The Cherokees recovered and agreed always to kill only what they absolutely needed. They also agreed to say a prayer of thanks to any animal that they killed, and to any plant that would be harvested for food or medicine. The Creator was happy with the Cherokees once again because harmony was restored among all that he had created.

The first story illustrates, among other things, that all of creation needs help occasionally and those who have the most lived experience among us will likely know best how to relate to God and the land. It is also a good story for understanding shalom relational covenant. Harmony can only be restored if we all do our part. The second story begins with all creation, including all human beings, living in harmony with one another and the Creator. The problem in the story arises when the humans overcrowd the rest of creation, disrupting harmony and becoming ungrateful. Ingratitude both precedes and follows greed. In this case, it

was greed for land. The humans believed they should have more resources than everyone else, causing there to be a great imbalance to the world. Christians would describe this greed as sin. Native Americans generally refer to it as imbalance or broken harmony.

With these two stories in mind, recall the Genesis 1–3 narratives. Everything is good, in balance, in harmony or in a natural implied state of shalom relational covenant. God has gifted all creation with life and those lives are to be lived in relationship with God and all other creation. Then, similar to the Cherokee story of the Origins of Disease and Medicine, human beings break the harmony through abusing their relationship to creation in a way God has forbade by eating what they should not have eaten. As a result, there is a problem with the land and all creation. The Genesis story reveals that human beings must live outside of the harmonious Garden of Eden and make the long journey to another promised place in order to learn how to live in harmony with all creation once again.

I surmise that the story of the Creator making a covenant with all creation, including human beings, is the real focus of all similar covenants in Scripture. Many of God’s covenants in Scripture, whether with Abraham (Gen 17:7); David (Psalm 89:3–4); Israel (Exod 6:4–5); the church (Acts 2:39), or others, can be implied to have all of creation in mind when seen in light of the grand covenants of Scripture.

In Genesis 9:8–17 God said to Noah,

Then God told Noah and his sons, “I hereby confirm my covenant with you and your descendants, and with all the animals that were on the boat with you—the birds, the livestock, and all the wild animals—every living creature on earth. Yes, I am confirming my covenant with you. Never again will floodwaters kill all living creatures; never again will a flood destroy the earth.” Then God said, “I am giving you a sign of my covenant with you and with all living creatures, for all generations to come. I have placed my rainbow in the clouds. It is the sign of my covenant with you and with all the earth. When I send clouds over the earth, the rainbow will appear in the clouds, and I will remember my covenant with you and with all living creatures. Never again will the floodwaters destroy all life. When I see the rainbow in the clouds, I will remember the eternal covenant between God and every living creature on earth.” Then God said to Noah, “Yes, this rainbow is the sign of the covenant I am confirming with all the creatures on earth.”

Notice that the covenant is with all creation, which points to the implied interconnectedness of humans with other creatures and with the land. This implied interconnectedness begins to be shown in the Genesis 1 account of creation but it is directly expressed in Genesis 2:18–20, “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him.’ So the Lord God formed from the ground all the wild animals and all the birds of the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would call them, and the man chose a name for each one. He gave names to all the livestock, all the birds of the sky, and all the wild animals. But still there was no helper just right for him.” (NLT)

It was the important task of Adam to get to know the animals of the Garden of Eden well enough to give them names. In most Indigenous societies, this means the namer will have an intimate familiarity with the animal, including its patterns and purpose in creation. God’s concern for all creation, even in the covenants where creation is not specifically mentioned, is implied because God is concerned about all creation, not just humanity. The fact that many of the covenants are anthropocentric speaks much more about humanity’s view of our self-importance over other creatures than it does about God’s lack of concern for the importance of all creation. Fortunately, there is enough mentioned of all creation throughout the Scriptures to form an understanding of relational covenant with all creation.

In the New Testament, Paul in Romans 8:19–23 implies that the restoration of creation, including land, and the restoration of humanity are inseparable.

For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, all creation was subjected to God’s curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us.

The summation of Paul’s understanding of Christ’s role in covenant and how it relates to our interconnectedness of all creation is found in the first chapter of Colossians.

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can’t see—such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together. Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So he is first in everything. For God in all his fullness was

pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross (Colossians 1:15–20, NLT).

In the storyline of God's covenant with God's creation, the Cosmic Christ, Creator of all things, becomes the created and he makes a sacrifice, both in the Incarnation and in the Crucifixion, as an act of love. We, and all creation, as benefactors of the gift of creation and the gift of continuous healing from our mistakes, now are covenanted to learn to live in shalom relational covenant with the land, all her creatures and with our Creator, Christ. The transaction occurring on the cross is not a transaction at all, but rather a gift of love for which we should live in gratitude with all creation. Eventually, our salvation will be linked, as it is right now, to all the rest of creation for eternity.

Indigenous peoples have little place for such Western constructs as a penal substitutionary atonement, but if they did, it would make much more sense for Custer to die for the sins of White people than for Jesus to do so. Fortunately, Custer dying as a sacrifice for us makes little sense, since he has no power to change things. Such an exchange lacks the relational component necessary to bring the community together in loving, familial relationship and in shalom covenant. Such an exchange lacks the notion of the interconnectedness of all things necessary in covenant love.

[86.](#) Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation*, 23.

[87.](#) Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, 14.

[88.](#) As told by Richard Francis.