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THE INDEPENDENT CHURCHES AND PROSELYTISM IN THE BALKANS

By Kostake Milkov

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The emergence of the new churches in the Balkans is a relatively recent phenomenon, and it is mainly connected with the Evangelical wing of Protestantism. Apart from the Congregationalist missions within the Ottoman Empire from the mid-nineteenth century including the Methodists and to a much smaller extent, the Baptists and the Pentecostals., and their spinoffs, mainly resulting from geopolitical shifts post-World War I, most of the Evangelical missionary endeavors on the territory of Former Yugoslavia began after the fall of Communism. These aspects are the focus of my essay, although some of the conclusions are also applicable to the Protestant communities with longer historical presence in the region.

Usually the most engaged with this emergence of new churches as stated above are the Evangelical movements that draw their ecclesiology from the Anabaptist heritage and not from the mainline Protestant denominations. Up to 90 percent of the foreign missionaries involved in these churches in the Balkans are from the United States, where most come from a variation of either Baptist or Pentecostal/Charismatic provenance understood in their broadest sense.

The significance of the role that foreign and especially American missionaries have played in the emergence of the new churches in the Balkans has been recognized directly or

indirectly by all Christian communities. One author, Linford Stutzmann, who researched this topic specifically for Albania more than a decade ago, reached a conclusion that can still be taken as a generic summary for the whole region today:¹

The official government response to the influx of evangelical missionaries and to the establishment and growth of Albanian evangelical churches has been mixed. On the one hand, evangelical missionaries from the West bring with them an incredible range of much needed resources, which they freely share within all levels of Albanian society. On the other hand, leaders of the traditional religious groups, which are seeking to re-establish their position in the new Albanian society, are pressuring the government to establish some form of control on foreign religious groups.²

Stutzman's study indicates that the international Christian missionary enterprise exercises, within the general condition of global social crisis experienced locally, a struggle for the right to struggle, a struggle against claims of "turf," specifically against claims of ecclesiastical turf. Although this struggle occurs entirely within the host country (in this case Albania), it may originate and be directed from outside the country, from locations such as Wheaton, Illinois, with competing struggles being directed from locations such as Athens, Mecca, or the Vatican. All the new religious competitors currently attracted to the post-Communist Balkans recognize their common enemy to be the reestablishment of religious monopolies. Another feature of the commitment to religious freedom presupposed by Western missionaries is the right of ordinary people to make religious choices.³

The research among Western Evangelicals indicates that their agenda of religious freedom goes beyond their self-interested continuation of their mission program and activities in the country of Albania. They are convinced that freedom of religion is necessary for the

¹ The data in the research are from a research conducted among Western missionaries between 1994 and 1996. During this time, three periods of extensive research among representatives of the member mission organizations of the Albanian Encouragement Project were carried out. The research was conducted with open-ended interviews. The purpose for conducting research among evangelical missionaries actually serving in the mission field was to listen to their own interpretation and perceptions about their hegemony and the impact of their efforts on Albanian culture and to observe any possible correlations and disjunctions between self-perception and action

² Linford Stutzman, "New Competitors for Hegemony: Western Evangelicals and the Rebuilding of Albanian Civil Society," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 36, (1999): 275.

³ *Ibid.*, 280.

building of a good society and that, in the long run, even the traditional Christian churches will benefit.

The results of a comprehensive questionnaire I put to clergy and laity of different Christian confessions to assess their view of the emergence of the new churches in the Balkans, in view of proselytism, not surprisingly in my view, tends to group into two spheres depending on whether they come from a person from the established churches (Eastern Orthodox or Roman Catholic), or from movements that are actually initiators of the emergence of the new churches.

Therefore, the responses from persons who belong to the traditional churches tend to emphasize the fact that the Balkans have had Christian witness from the very beginning of Christianity, and that some of the methods for recruiting believers for the new churches are questionable. The complaints mostly refer to the use of material and financial resources as a way of appealing to the local population. One of the interviewees explicitly notes: “I am against all kinds of communities that intrude and choose inappropriate methods to spread their faith. Actions that break social harmony are wrong. If there is a community that wants to worship God without causing side problems, that this is totally fine with me.”

In general, these interviewees identify these “inappropriate” methods of recruiting believers as proselytism that create religious confusion, and uncertainty that leads to divisions and intolerance. Nevertheless, the churches that can be identified broadly as Evangelical are seen in a rather positive light and on friendly terms with the traditional churches. In contrast, some movements on the fringe of Evangelicalism are assessed as negative phenomena in the region.

The harshest evaluation of the new churches is that they cannot be really called churches. One interviewee could not even understand the concept of “new churches.” He

believes these are small imported religious communities and sects that only the government should deal with, i.e. its relevant ministry or other governmental service.

What is interesting about this research is that the question about the new churches was two-fold in the questionnaire. The second part of it asks: “Do you think these new churches are accepted among the people or additional effort and openness is needed to understand their intentions?” None of the interviewees from the traditional churches thought the questions relevant to answer it.

The final conclusion is that although a distinction has been made between the new churches that accept the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed of faith, and those movements that rejected it partially or completely, the Eastern Orthodox interviewees have a dogmatic hurdle to view any of these churches ecclesologically as an expression of the one true church.

The answers from the members of the new churches were, again unsurprising. The general perception was that that the emergence of new churches is positive and their role in reaching the people with the gospel can be of significant importance, but that the traditional churches are reserved in the communication with the new churches, and look on them with suspicion.

The most positive features identified of the new churches involve not being burdened with nationality, and their emphasis on the Bible and on the communication of the Gospel. As such, they are the principal means of Christian growth. The traditional churches (here, the traditional Protestant groups in the Balkans such as the Lutheran, the Reformed or the Methodist are included too) have largely enshrined a now outdated culture, and trying too hard to bring change within those congregations would divert energies into unnecessary internal conflicts that would be better used in evangelism for new projects / congregations.

The interviewees are not, however, unaware about the challenges that the new churches have to overcome. There is a consensus that the overall effect of the new churches

on the Balkan society is still weak and below its true potential. The main reasons for this are seen in the ever-occurring fragmentation among and within the new churches, harboring attitudes of sectarianism and isolationism. These tendencies further complicate the relationship with the traditional churches and are a cause of miscommunication and misunderstanding.

That charge from the traditional churches that material and financial aid of the new churches are sometimes used for recruitment of members should be a reminder about the thin line between proselytism and genuine evangelism. Nevertheless, the interviewees from the new churches make the point that social activism is part of their identity and that much of the activities the churches engage in are offered to the wider society regardless of people's religious convictions. As such, they believe they are addressing the issues of contemporary society which includes the role of women in the church, gender equality, addiction related to substance abuse, victims of domestic violence, prison ministries, care for the elderly and other vulnerable groups.

In regards to how the new churches are perceived in the context they emerge, the unanimous view is that the churches are not well integrated in the society and the majority of the population is suspicious of their message, motives, and methods. The new independent churches need to make additional efforts to explain their aims and values that will be understood as non-threatening to the culture and the society they work within. Special focus should be the relationship with the traditional churches and serious effort made to understand their role and position.

The Issue of Competing Ecclesiologies

The problem of proselytism is really not only a problem about different views of what is the essence of evangelism, but also that of competing ecclesiologies. Which is the true church? Ecclesiology is standing as a serious issue between Christians from the Orthodox and

Evangelical confession. Take the question of baptism and re-baptism. Is it acceptable for Evangelicals to baptize people already baptized in the Orthodox Church? Is that the ultimate act of proselytism? But what are the Evangelicals to do, especially if they believe the Bible teaches the baptism of believers only? Shall they consider the infant baptism of the Orthodox converts valid when the official view of the Orthodox is that they are not really a church? We are faced with a mutual ecclesial exclusivity. One side asks what is wrong with our baptism, while the other side retorts: what is wrong with us being a church?

A possible path to dealing with this ecclesiological impasse is offered by the Croatian-born theologian at Yale, Miroslav Volf. In his book, *After Our Likeness*, Volf insists on what he calls the “interecclesial minimum” that is that each church should be open to every other church as a condition to form a basis for mutual ecclesiality. On the basis of the NT witness, Volf suggests a model of Plurality of Churches or plurality of ecclesiologies.

Characterizing the Free Church and the episcopal traditions generally, Volf suggests that “both RC and EO models of church underestimate the enormous ecclesiological significance of concrete relations with other Christian confessions.”⁴

The accent of Volf’s ecclesiology is that church happens in a particular congregation assembled for the reading of Scripture, and for celebration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. The congregation gathered “in the name of Jesus” around the activities mentioned above is a true church. Rather than looking into the catholicity of a certain congregation through the lenses of being a “part” of a certain universal whole that is bigger than its parts and thus constitutes the church universal, Volf insists that it is the Spirit who constitutes both the local and universal church into an “anticipation of the eschatological gathering of the entire people of God.”

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 134.

However, The Trinitarian logic he espouses has to be followed to all levels of ecclesiology including that of structure: “The question is not *whether* the church is an institution, but rather *what kind* of institution it is.” A leading feature of an institution, Volf observes is their “stable structures of social interaction.”⁵

In this side of eternity, the church needs some structure and office in order to function within the affairs of the world. Therefore, Volf suggests that the “offices are a particular type of charismata,” and that on that account there is “no difference in principle between officeholders and other members” ... which will “divide the church into two groups.” Such theological thinking leads him to conclude that “all members of the church, both officeholders and ‘laypersons,’ are fundamentally equal.”⁶ Based on these charismata though, any local church carries catholicity in itself as it *now* anticipates and participates the fullness of God’s salvation. This includes “the catholicity of charismata.” Even if the Free Church ecclesiology would not pertain to catholicity for a lack of an officeholder bishop figure, in Volf’s assessment it still amounts to that. He writes, “each congregation contains all ministries within itself necessary to mediate salvation” and “the totality of its members is the bearer of these ministries. Here catholicity means the fullness of spiritual gifts allotted to the local church.”⁷ In a more concrete attempt to define what he assumes as “catholicity,” Volf explains the local church in an anticipation of the full realization of the Church catholic. As such, “catholicity” is not confined to the Church only. To perceive itself as catholic, the disposition of the church has to be as that of those called out from all backgrounds to live in communion with each other, with the Triune God, and with the whole created world.

The question then of proselytism is not only about stealing sheep, but really about the extent to which different Christian confessional bodies can recognize each other as a genuine expression of the Christian faith. Indeed, the presence of the Oriental Orthodox churches at

⁵ Ibid., 235 (author’s italics).

⁶ Ibid., 246.

⁷ Ibid., 273 (author’s italics).

ecumenical gatherings between Evangelicals as represented by the Lausanne Movement and the Eastern Orthodox churches is a momentous example that we live in a time when it has become possible to recognize each other in the Spirit as sisters and brothers in Christ. The failed attempts from the fifth to the seventh century to reinstate union between the Chalcedonian and the non-Chalcedonian churches makes us wonder what would have been the course of Christianity in the case this schism was healed then. All history is in God's hands, and he sovereignly rules its course. We are not to be concerned about God's final victory in the eschatological establishment of His Kingdom. However, we are responsible to be faithful and obedient with the time it has been given to us to minister towards the advancement of the Kingdom of Heaven. The question remains whether one day, future Christian generations will wonder what would have happened if this generation of Orthodox and Evangelical Christians found a way in spite of their differences to unite in such time as this around a vision for common mission as a way of fulfilling the great commission in an increasingly secularized society, rising militant atheism, and the rapid radicalization of other religions.

How the Churches Should Respond to the Current Challenges

My research led me to believe that proper response of theology then should not be a withdrawal within the realm of the fundamentalism of faith but an attempt to pose the question of God afresh. It should draw on its tradition of faith seeking understanding.⁸

That this is so becomes even more evident from the unanimous agreement of the interviewees that the principal response of the church to the issues and the challenges addressed in this research is cooperation. They all detect the lack of such cooperation that is due to complex historical-theological circumstances. Differences should be taken into account and addressed in the course of cooperation, but its essence should be the common

⁸ Franz, 36-43.

ground of all of the aspects that invite Christians of all backgrounds to unanimous action that promotes human flourishing as described in the Bible.

Besides ecclesiology, another significant issue that is laterally related to proselytism, but is of crucial importance in the dialogue between the two confessions, is the understanding of Christ's death on the cross, and his resurrection. In other words, there are deep anthropological, hamartiological and soteriological issues that need addressing in any attempt of rapprochement.

What did Christ's Death Achieve?

Orthodox theologians have been very outspoken in their critique of the Protestant, and especially Evangelical forensic view of justification. The critique might have some ground only if it targets certain overemphases in such forensic view, but it is completely groundless if it aims to deny its biblicity. The legal categories are categories that Paul himself uses very often. Paul borrows the metaphor from the prophets of Israel: "Their entire legacy is activated in this terminology, so that justification concerns God's right as the Creator of creation or, we might say, the justice of the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed."⁹

When Paul explains the meaning of Christ's death he does not elaborate it, but he seems to assume that the readers have enough pre-knowledge to tell them briefly that "Christ died *for us*" (1 Thess. 5:10, 1 Cor. 8:11, Rom. 14:15). It is not only that Christ died for our sins but he was made "sin on our behalf" so that "we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). The vicarious language is especially powerful whenever Christ's blood is mentioned since the blood of the animals in the Old Testament was indispensable for the covering of one's guilt. Paul's words in Rom. 3:23-25 seems to depict Jesus' death in these exact terms. Even more, "place of atonement" (*hilasterion*) unmistakably points toward the cover of the ark of the covenant where a sacrifice of atonement was offered once a year by

⁹Hinlicky, "Theological Anthropology," 49.

the High priest (Cf. Heb. 9:5). John speaks much in the same manner when he says that God “sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 Jn. 4:10). The robes of the people of “every tribe” in Rev. 7 are white because they have been washed in the “blood of the Lamb” (7:14). In other words, the culpability of all those people is wiped out through the precious blood of the sinless Christ.

Eventually, the imagery from Isaiah 52-53 had made an immense impact upon the vicarious understanding of Jesus’ death in the New Testament. Isaiah 53:10 “... it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain ...” finds an almost exact echo in Col. 1:19-20, “and through him God was pleased ... making peace through the blood of his cross.” From all of this, we can see that Christ’s death is satisfactory. He died to make satisfaction for human sins. No matter how much the Orthodox would object to the satisfactory theory of redemption, the New Testament simply assumes that a ransom has been paid (Mk. 10:45; Matt. 20:28). So, the question is not whether but to whom was the ransom paid? Usually, early church thinkers thought that the ransom had been paid to the devil himself. We find hints toward this idea in Origen who asserts that Christ had been handed by the Father to the evil powers. On the basis of the correct premise, that the devil won the right to dominate humanity through deception, it seemed also correct that Jesus had to offer his life to the devil as “ransom for many.” However, already by the fourth century, this view was strongly criticized. Gregory Nazianzus writes that the devil has no right to receive anything from God: “... How insulting this is! The thief receives the price of ransom.” Besides that, Nazianzus criticizes the view which would say that Jesus paid the ransom to the Father. Nazianzus asks: “... if to the Father, then first in what way? Were we in captivity under him? And secondly for what reason?”¹⁰ No matter how objectionable it may be, Anselm’s theory of satisfaction of God’s justice or honor is still the most plausible answer. He rejects “the devil’s right

¹⁰Gregory the Theologian, "*Oratorio 45*," PG 36-653 A-B, in Symeon Rodger, "The Soteriology of Anselm of Canterbury," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 34, no. 1 (1985): 40.

theory,” arguing that it would be incongruous for God to make a payment to his own creature. The payment is made to satisfy God’s justice and his honor. Anselm’s theory is based on the idea that sin is a failure to pay tribute to God from what we owe to Him. Man could have never been restored to the original state without satisfaction. That satisfaction can be given only by a God-man: “... if no one but God can make that satisfaction and no one but man is obliged to make it, then it is necessary that a God-Man make it.”¹¹

The Orthodox unease with the satisfaction theory comes from their misconception of it as a reduction of salvation to the satisfaction of the Law. None of the Western theologians would accept such a caricature of their view. For them, satisfaction of the Law would be *only* the negative side of redemption. “...Moreover, the Western theological frame of reference concerning divine justice in history remains important and is defensible, though not in a way that fails to integrate today the Eastern understanding of salvation as eternal communion in the triune God, let alone contradicts it.”¹²

Orthodox theology modifies the ransom theory, denying that anything has been paid to the devil, and puts an emphasis on Christ’s victory over Satan and evil powers. By his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, Christ opened the way for re-establishment of the communion between God and man by which man escapes decay and mortality. United to him, Christians are to be victorious, too. This imagery goes back to the Old Testament with its motives of Yahweh’s victorious encounter with His enemies (which are at the same time enemies of Israel). This principle lies at the core of the creation of Israel as the people of God. Yahweh is delivering them from the hand of the Pharaoh who is an incarnation of Ra, the Sun god (Ex. 4:22-23).¹³ Since Passover, the history of Israel can be traced from one victory of the Lord to another, delivering them from their enemies with his mighty hand.

¹¹Anselm of Canterbury, *Why God Became Man*, II, ch. 6.

¹²Hinlicky, "Theological Anthropology," 44-45.

¹³Each of the plagues was a kind of victorious judgment over a particular Egyptian deity.

In much the same manner, Jesus' ministry opens with confrontation of Satan in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-2; Mk. 1:12-13; Lk. 4:1-2). Numerous New Testament passages depict Jesus' ministry as one of defeating evil powers.¹⁴ In the inauguration of the Kingdom of God, Jesus stands in opposition to the "prince of this world" (Jn. 16:11), or the "god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4). Satan falls from heaven "as lightning" (Lk. 10:18) as a result of Jesus' activity and that of his disciples. Actually, one of the reasons for Christ's incarnation is "to destroy the works of the devil" (Heb. 2:13-14; 1 Jn. 3:8). This imagery of the work of Christ ought to be more prominent in Protestant soteriology.

Although Gustav Aulen in his *Christus Victor* rather overstates his case, he makes an important contribution to the resurgence of the classic theory of the atonement. Aulen's greatest contribution to better understanding of the atonement is probably his refusal to imagine any future to Christianity without re-emphasizing the reality of evil in the world, and engaging in the battle against it with anticipation of the ultimate triumph of the Lamb of God. Looking from this perspective, Christians are to resist all kinds of injustice, oppression, and other expressions of evil, putting their trust in the power of God.

The theologian who is much more balanced in his elaboration of the classical theory is Karl Barth. First of all, Barth is in accordance with the patristic understanding that the work of the atonement is effective at the moment of the incarnation. The cross and the resurrection are taken to be of a revealing nature, bringing to a close God's plan of salvation. He objects to most Western theories of atonement because of their failure to see the soteriological connection between incarnation and atonement. For him, Christ's sacrifice is not first of all "an external transference of penalty between sinners and God," but "rather ...

¹⁴Cf. Gal. 4:3-9; Eph. 1:10-22; 2:14-16; 3:7-13; 6:12; Phil. 2:9-11; Col. 1:13-14; 2:8-15; 1 Pet. 3:18-22.

the culmination of God's incarnational penetration into the alienated roots of humanity in order to cancel sin and guilt."¹⁵

Eventually, the most important feature which connects Barth to the classic theory is his emphasis on Christ's triumph over the powers of darkness. The victory is assured because God incarnate is the one who is engaged in the war against evil. He is the supreme power, a living God whose mighty hand no one can withstand.

At the same time, Barth employs language which supports the substitutionary view of the atonement. Propositions like "God in Jesus Christ has taken our place,"¹⁶ "The Son of God fulfilled the righteous judgment on us men by himself taking our place as man and in our place taking the judgment;"¹⁷ "Christ is our Representative and Substitute,"¹⁸ tells us that Barth is also aware that in God both love and justice are operative. Accordingly, sin must be judged, punished and expiated. He depicts Jesus as the one who takes the place of the reprobate and who suffers God's judgmental dealing with sin.

Barth's dialectic theology is expressed in his exposition of the atonement. God's dealing with human sin is beyond the capability of intellectual reasoning. The atonement is an ultimate divine mystery in which there is "... God's eternal covenant with man, his eternal choice of this creature, his eternal faithfulness to himself and to it."¹⁹

The Complementary Nature of the Two Theories of the Atonement

The very meaning of the English word "at-one-ment," bringing two or more divided parties together includes both aspects as explained previously. Christ's work brings forgiveness of human sin and represents victory over the evil powers which enables believers to engage in the victorious battle themselves. His life of obedience and perfect love initiates

¹⁵Karl Barth, *CD IV/1*:281.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 216

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 222.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 230.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 124.

the release of their potential for obedience and love after sin, guilt, and bondage to evil have been vanquished.

On its own, each theory comes to a point where, taken to an extreme, cannot give a coherent picture. In the substitutionary theory, the atonement is seen primarily as remission of the consequences of sin, i.e., its punishment. At this point, the classical theory's appeal is much stronger since it is the sin itself that has been abolished by Christ's victory on the cross. However, the main weakness of the classic theory is that it does not hold people as guilty sinners but as unfortunate victims of the deceptive power of the devil. Thus, we may ask the Orthodox how the victory over evil atones for the guilt which accompanies evil deeds? It seems that the past here is not taken seriously enough. "But atonement means repairing and rectifying of the past, or at last it means nothing at all."²⁰

The classic, or rather the refined Orthodox model of the atonement has to find its due place among Protestants, especially, Evangelical Christians. The biblical imagery of a cosmic battle might be too abstract to appreciate its significance for our daily life. Nevertheless, the Bible never loses sight of the cosmic battle which has an impact on earth's affairs. The spiritual forces which opposed Jesus' ministry on the earth exercised their attack through the socio-political structures in the Graeco-Roman world. The Kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurated is in contrast to that of the earthly governments (Matt. 20:28 and parallels). We should identify with all victims of power as Jesus himself identified with humanity by taking on himself human flesh. In the words of John Meyendorff, "The joy and the dignity of the slaves, of the persecuted, of the deprived, and of the humiliated, in other words of all those who are victims of this world, of its power, and of the determinism from which Christ freed

²⁰Hwa Yung, "Theories of Atonement and the Mission of the Church," *Asia Journal of Theology* 3, no. 2 (1989): 546.

man when He died on the Cross, and its meaning is best understood by those who are themselves suffering from the powerful.”²¹

What is so appealing in the message of the Orthodox view of redemption and subsequently *theosis* is the emphasis on the reality of the change of the regenerated believer while he is still on the earth. Instead of hoping for the kingdom to come or waiting for death to rescue us from this corrupted condition, *theosis* affirms life in the present. And this can be reality only because of our participation in the life of Christ. “In the incessant spiritual contest against the powers of evil and death, which is taken up at the moment of our dying and rising with Christ at baptism, we are fortified and strengthened by our participation in the flesh and blood of the glorified Christ.”²²

When we consider the historical context of the book of the Revelation, we are able to see that the mythological language of the cosmic war depicts the situation in the real world. The application of the message of the Revelation has to do more with the earth than with heaven. It is the hope of heaven, the coming kingdom of God, which gives strength to Christians to continue their fight against evil while on earth. As a matter of fact, only the classic view of the atonement sees the Kingdom of God already established on the earth standing in utmost opposition to the evil kingdoms under the dominion of Satan. “Christ is the *eschaton*, or the divinely ordained climax of crisis of history. It was as a gift of God and not on account of human effort. It was the manifest and effective assertion of the divine sovereignty in conflict with evil in the world.”²³

Although it seems that we live in a period of “the eclipse of God” (Buber) and God’s existence is far from self-evident, remembering what God has done for us in the past gives us hope that he will bring the history of creation to a glorious victory over the powers of darkness, sin, and evil. Christians can confidently continue their active growth toward the

²¹John Meyendorff, *Living Tradition* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1978), 140.

²²Petro B. T. Bilaniuk, "The Mystery of Theosis," 65.

²³*Ibid.*, 65.

likeness of Christ and be victorious with his victory. “In Jesus we have exhibited the power by which God rules the world.”²⁴ If Jesus conquered the world (Jn. 16:33), the believers who are joined to him have done the same too.

²⁴Gayle Gerber Koontz, "The Liberation of Atonement" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 63, no. 2 (1989): 183.