2007

Review of Shelton's "Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission"

Charles J. Conniry
George Fox University, cconniry@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes

Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes/43
Dr. R. Larry Shelton’s new book, Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission joins a growing body of literature on the subject of Christ’s atonement produced within the last several years. Why the need for another book on atonement? Among the more than thirty books published by Christian authors on this subject since 2005, Shelton’s contribution stands alone for a variety of reasons. Unlike the majority of these works, which proceed on the well-trodden paths of forensically-based theory, Shelton appeals to his own heart-transplant experience as the basis of an alternative metaphor for atonement that invokes “covenant relationship” as the primary integrative motif of Christ’s death and resurrection.

The book includes a survey of atonement in both Hebrew and New Testament Scriptures, a detailed review of key historic atonement theories, and a penetrating critique of the penal substitutionary view of the atonement. Shelton argues that this penal view, in its most simplistic and popular form, has often truncated the gospel—reducing it to a go-to-heaven-when-you-die sort of salvation—and often rendered the proclamation of the cross unintelligible to a postmodern audience.

The body of the text consists of twelve chapters ranging in length from five to thirty-seven pages. In the first chapter, Shelton underscores why he set about the task of
writing such a book—namely, because of the urgent need to communicate “the biblical and theological concepts of the Christian faith to a twenty-first-century audience” (p. 3). The second chapter is a personal and poignant account of Shelton’s heart transplant experience. The author highlights several ways in which receiving a new heart is analogous to internalizing the benefits of Christ’s atonement. In the third chapter Shelton explicates the core of the covenant relational model upon which his atonement thesis is based, summing it up in the phrase, “Divine Expectations” (a term he originally envisioned as the title of the book). Among other things, says Shelton, God expects to have a relationship with human beings and he expects human beings to be faithful to these relational expectations. In the end, this fresh emphasis on the relational aspects of humanity’s interaction with God is intended to provide “the biblical balance” by which to maintain the emphasis on “family relationship” and to view “the legal language in the context of biblical covenant Law rather than in the abstract, principle-centered Western view of civil justice” (p. 32).

Chapters four through seven cover various Old and New Testament atonement themes. Chapter four consists of two main sections. The first treats Old Testament teaching on Covenant in general and the connection that Israel’s covenant shares with the church in particular. The second half of the chapter examines the connection between covenant relationship and atonement. The fifth chapter shows the function of sacrifices as gifts of covenant obedience, rather than as penalty payments to propitiate sin. In chapter six the author demonstrates the connection between New Testament and Old Testament conceptions of covenant relationship and atonement, both theologically—through atonement themes reflected in the cross, the Incarnation, and the Trinity—and biblically—through various covenant expressions in the corpus of the New Testament and the early church’s practice of covenant community embodied in baptism and Luchariat.

In chapters eight through eleven, Shelton assesses the development of key atonement theories that have emerged throughout the history of Christianity. Chapter eight surveys several key events in history that combined to distort the biblical conception of covenant relationship and atonement. Chapters nine, ten, and eleven present a detailed historical survey and assessment of the most influential atonement theories. Shelton summarizes the three classic theories—the “recapitulation theory,” the “ransom theory,” and the Christus Victor theory, artfully demonstrating their correspondence to his thesis of interpersonal covenant relationship (chapter 9). He then turns to the three principal forensic theories—Anselm’s “satisfaction theory” and Wesley’s modified Anselmianism; the “penal substitution theory” as represented by Luther, Melanchthon, and Calvin; and the more moderate “governmental theory” of Grotius and the Arminian and Wesleyan theologians (chapter 10).

Shelton acknowledges that several chief proponents of forensic theory, including Luther and Calvin, embraced a more nuanced conception of the atonement that also incorporated key covenant-relationship themes. Nevertheless, their stress on
the legal implications of Jesus’ death and resurrection cast the forensic dye that eventually led many present-day protagonists of penal substitution to conceive of the atonement in exclusively Western legal terms.

Chapter eleven rounds out Shelton’s survey of historic atonement theories by highlighting several views that are more congenial to a covenant conception of Christ’s atonement—from the classic moral influence theory of Peter Abelard to the more recent sacramental and therapeutic models of S. J. Gambrillsfielder, P. P. Waldenström and the mimetic and incarnational models of René Girard and Robin Collins. In each instance, Shelton adduces points of convergence between these conceptions of atonement and his covenant-relational model, which he sees as the central motif in each of these other views.

Shelton closes the book in chapter twelve by issuing the challenge to find an effective approach by which to retell the redemption story to a twenty-first-century audience. He advances the work of Wesleyan theologian H. Ray Dunning as an exemplary instance of scholarly reflection that demonstrates both a concern for contextualization and an emphasis on the covenantal connection between God’s relationship to Israel and Christ’s work of reconciliation and covenant renewal on behalf of the church.

Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission is not an easy read. Shelton forces his readers to think; not merely read. The text is dense at some points and a bit turgid at others. One seeming anomaly is the conspicuous repetition of key themes and concepts from chapter to chapter. Nevertheless there appears to be a method to Shelton’s repetitious madness.

In the interest of full disclosure, I must note that Larry Shelton and I are colleagues. We have had numerous conversations about this subject over the last decade. But reading Cross and Covenant did what casual conversations could not do. Slowly and steadily, Shelton’s visiting and revisiting of such terms as “righteousness,” “sin,” “justification,” “sanctification,” and “salvation”—nuanced as they were by covenant relationship rather than forensic contract—had its desired effect, rousing me from my penal-substitutionary slumber and causing me to see all things pertaining to Christ’s atonement in a different light.

There are two takeaways that I consider most valuable. The first is Shelton’s reframing of the all-too familiar term, “righteousness.” Rather than a thing that one either has or does not have, righteousness, argues Shelton, speaks first and foremost to the condition of being rightly related. A careful reading of this book will leave few unchanged on the matter. The second takeaway is the argument that forgiveness and penal substitution are mutually exclusive, where a debt is paid in full, reasons Shelton, there is no longer any need for forgiveness in the biblical sense. Additionally, Shelton’s telling of how and why the Western church adopted forensic categories is also very compelling. All in all, if one is intent on reading the most important literature on the atonement—and especially if one is
interested in finding ways to communicate the wonder of Jesus’ saving love to a
twenty-first-century world, Shelton’s Cross and Covenant is a must-read.

Charles J. Conniry, Jr.,
George Fox Evangelical Seminary