

Queer Theology: Queering the Atonement

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Discussion hosted by
Phoenix Community Church
Kalamazoo, MI

Queering the Atonement

- **Opening Prayer**
- **Welcome**
- **We are recording this session and will make it available on youtube. The slides will be available at <https://phoenixchurch.org>.**

Jesus the Christ

- **Who is Jesus? What was (is) his mission and ministry in the world? Some ways we might answer that question:**
 - Teacher
 - Prophet
 - Healer
 - Revelation of God's love (or God's path of love)
 - Building God's realm (or God's kin-dom)

Jesus the Christ

- **One traditional answer to Jesus' identity that many understand as foundational to being a Christian: Jesus was the child of God sent to die for our sins that we might believe in him and have everlasting life.**
- **This statement has had a profound effect on Christianity. It implies not only that there is meaning to be found in Jesus' death, but that it is critical to who Jesus is.**
- **The question of what meaning is to be found in Jesus' death is addressed by what we call atonement theory.**

Atonement Theory

- Atonement can be defined as “the restoration of the broken relationship between God and [humanity].”
- Another way to think of it: at-one-ment = how do we become one with God?
- As we will see, this question overlaps with questions of sacrifice, sin, and salvation.
- There’s never been an “official” church answer to the question of atonement. Instead we have multiple theories that propose how the life and death of Jesus repair the human-God relationship.

Atonement Theory

- **5 prevalent atonement theories**

- Ransom theory: Because of sin we are in slavery to the Devil and must be ransomed (attributed to Origen)
- Satisfaction theory: Because of sin we have dishonored God and a debt must be paid (attributed to Anselm of Canterbury)
- Moral Influence theory: Because of sin our relationship with God was disrupted and it was necessary for Jesus to show us the way of love, even unto death (attributed to Peter Abailard)
- Substitution theory: Because of sin we deserve eternal punishment but Jesus took this punishment upon himself in our stead (attributed to Martin Luther)
- Classical theory: Because of sin it was necessary for Jesus to vanquish the powers of evil (attributed to Gustaf Aulen).

Atonement Theory

- **Significant criticisms exist for each of these theories. For example:**
 - creating a dualistic world view where Satan is as powerful as God (Ransom)
 - allows humanity to deny its own responsibility by blaming the devil (Ransom and Classical)
 - Putting conditions on forgiveness also puts limits on God (Satisfaction, Substitution)
 - God becomes a divine child abuser (Satisfaction, Substitution)
 - Puts the onus of salvation on humanity (Moral Influence)

Atonement Theory

- **Break-out discussion**

- We'll break into small groups for about 10 minutes.
- Questions for discussion:
 - Who is Jesus to you?
 - How do you understand the significance of Jesus' death?
 - What do you like or dislike about the traditional atonement theories?
- When we come back, we'll spend 2 or 3 minutes sharing highlights from our group reflections.

Queering Atonement Theory

- Another problem is that one only receives the benefits of atonement if you're in the churches good graces...
- Atonement theories, which attempt to tell us how the supposedly broken human-God relationship can be repaired, are in fact problematic for queer people.
- Theological concepts used to discuss atonement, especially sacrifice, sin, salvation, and eternal life, have often been used by Christian institutions to control queer people through demoralization and demonization.
- Note that each of the atonement theories mentioned were described with the phrase "because of sin." When churches define queer people as sinful, they are building walls of exclusion using sexuality and gender. To get past those walls, queer people are asked to change their fundamental being – who God created them to be.

Queering Atonement Theory

- In other words, Christian culture creates a box around sexuality and gender to create power for itself and maintain order and meaning. We don't need to make the box bigger, but tear down its walls.
- What meaning can atonement theory, which promises good people an eternal bliss in heaven and sinful (queer) people an eternal agony in hell, have for those who cannot or will not conform to the church's ideals of heterosexuality and gender identity?

Queering Atonement Theory

- **Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood define the characteristics of what constitutes a queer theology:**
 - “introduces a profound questioning into the ways of love in our lives as individuals and as society, and the things love can do in our world.”
 - “takes its place not at the centre of the theological discourses conversing with power, but at the margins.”
 - “strives ... for differentiation and plurality ... life and love in all its diversity”
 - “a political and sexual queering of theology”
 - “a movement, and an alliance of people who question the sexual construction of theology”
 - “deconstructing heterosexual epistemology and presuppositions in theology, but also unveiling the different, the suppressed face of God amidst it”
 - “takes as its starting point the radical, and as yet unexplored, nature of incarnation.”

Queering Atonement Theory

- **A queer theology of atonement might then ask:**
 - Where is love in the atonement?
 - Where are the margins of atonement?
 - Where is the renewing diversity?
 - What does politics and sexuality have to do with atonement?
 - How is traditional atonement theory sexually constructed?
 - Where is the face of God hidden by the enforced heterosexual cis-gender norm?
 - What does the incarnation have to do with atonement?

Queering Atonement Theory

- An attempt at a statement of atonement.
- Jesus' (the queer Christ's) death shows us there is nothing that would stop him from loving us (queer people, the marginalized) and in that gift of total commitment to love, he reveals to us the path to God.
- How does this answer the questions of a queer theology of atonement?

Queering Atonement Theory

- **Where is the love in the atonement?**
- **Jesus' death resulted from his total commitment to loving those on the margins because that love challenged the powers of the world.**
- **This affirms for us that love is in how we are meant to relate to God, to neighbor, to enemy, to all creation.**

Queering Atonement Theory

- **Where are the margins of atonement?**
- **The margins are those excluded.**
- **In traditional theories, the margins are the unrepentant sinners, those who won't buy into the church's doctrinal box.**
- **A queer atonement theology needs to tear down the walls of that box. No one is excluded from Jesus' love, especially those who have been marginalized by society.**
 - Question the role of sin(ful) doctrine
 - Look to the queer Christ

Queering Atonement Theory

- **For any atonement theory meaningful to queer people, we must disrupt sin(ful) discourse.**
 - Sin becomes a discourse of demonization. A person's queerness, which many would claim as an inherent dimension of their life, is labeled as sinful, making the queer person the “other” who is not worthy and destroying the self esteem of any queer person who accepts the sin(ful) discourse.
 - In this discourse, redemption requires living out an approved asexual/heterosexual and gender-conforming life.
- **We need to rethink the concept of sin: what sin is and how sin is to be “corrected.”**

Queering Atonement Theory

- We need to return to the concept that sin is not wrong-doing but that which separates us from God and neighbor.
- The “correction” of sin becomes a question of living in right relationship with God and (queer) neighbor.
- It is not queerness that needs to be corrected but the act of marginalizing queer people.
- Jesus’ love was a commitment to embrace queer people, not change them.

Queering Atonement Theory

- Another way to disrupt the sin(ful) discourse is through queer images of Christ that allow queer people to see their selves in Christ.
- If the Christ is not queer then Christ cannot know what it is to be queer and thus Christ has no meaning for queer people. And if Christ has no meaning for queer people, then the Christ has no meaning for anyone.
- To see the queer Christ is to make the sinless savior into the image of sin in the eyes of much of the church. Such a paradox is inevitably disruptive of the sin(ful) discourse.

Atonement Theory

- **Break-out discussion**

- We'll break into small groups for about 10 minutes.
- Questions for discussion:
 - How do you understand or define sin?
 - How does sin relate to one's sexuality or gender?
 - Does sin have anything to do with Jesus' death? Why or why not?
- When we come back, we'll spend 2 or 3 minutes sharing highlights from our group reflections.

Queering Atonement Theory

- **Where is the renewing diversity?**
- **In an at-one-ment of love, none are excluded. The queer Jesus is for everyone. The death and resurrection story itself is a metaphor of life-giving renewal.**

Queering Atonement Theory

- **Disruption is not enough. Queer Theology's deconstructive and destabilizing methodologies can help along the death of bad, oppressive theologies. But it also needs to give attention to resurrection through Christian theologies that are more relevant to our modern, queer contexts.**
- **Neither the death or the resurrection of Jesus as historical events were necessary for forgiveness of sin. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan believe Jesus' death was not necessary but inevitable. Death is simply what happened to political activists challenging Roman power in the first century.**

Queering Atonement Theory

- **But what if we disregard the historicity of those events for a moment and ask what important truths about God and humanity might be found in Jesus' death and resurrection as a story? What meanings do we find?**
 - Jesus' death as a result of evil actions and his subsequent resurrection can provide humanity with hope. There isn't anything that we cannot overcome.
 - Jesus' death can be a metaphor for personal enlightenment. As Christians, we are called to die and be reborn, but not in a literal sense.
- **It is not the intent to stress that Jesus was not “real.” On the contrary, (queer) Jesus as the divine incarnated as human is essential to the story. That God knows intimately what it is like to be (a queer) human is critically important to the God-human relationship. The incarnation can also be a metaphor for the divinity present in all (queer) humans.**

Queering Atonement Theory

- **What does politics and sexuality have to do with atonement?**
- **The church has used the various theories of atonement and the sin(ful) discourse to maintain power over individuals and society.**
- **It is through the sin(ful) discourse that those with the “wrong” sexuality are demonized. A queer atonement of love attempts to break through that discourse.**
- **Atonement is not about the sin(ful) discourse. It is about the queer Christ drawing all people to a loving relationship with God.**

Queering Atonement Theory

- **How is traditional atonement theory sexually constructed?**
- **The key to traditional atonement relies on the powers of a white male asexual/heterosexual Christ.**
- **Only those willing to fit into the approved asexual/heterosexual cis-gender norm are welcome.**
- **The queer Christ affirms that the queer atonement is for everyone.**

Queering Atonement Theory

- **Where is the face of God hidden by the enforced heterosexual cis-gender norm?**
- **Traditional atonement theory attempts to hide the face of God which is in each and every queer person.**
- **A Queer theology of atonement unveils the sacredness of queer people and the divinity that resides within all people.**

Queering Atonement Theory

- **What does the incarnation have to do with atonement?**
- **God incarnated in the queer Christ reveals the God incarnate in all people, queer or not.**
- **As noted earlier, if Christ is not queer, then the incarnation has no meaning for queer people and therefore no meaning for anyone.**

Atonement Theory

- **Break-out discussion**

- We'll break into small groups for about 10 minutes.
- Questions for discussion:
 - How does Jesus's death relate to queer people finding reunion with God?
 - How do we understand atonement from the margins?
- When we come back, we'll spend 2 or 3 minutes sharing highlights from our group reflections.

Queering Atonement Theory

- **God so loved the world – all of creation, all people - that he gave his only queer child – not to die but as love incarnate – so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. Jesus doesn't save us from the sin that is wrong-doing. Perfection is not our bond with God. The queer Christ saves us from the sin that demonizes and separates. The queer Christ brings us to God. The queer Christ heals the love missing from life.**

**Thank you for joining us for
today's discussion!
Questions or comments:
office@phoenixchurch.org**