

Zeitschrift: Theologische Zeitschrift
Herausgeber: Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel
Band: 42 (1986)
Heft: 2

Artikel: Atonement, History and Narrative
Autor: Webster, J.B.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-878288>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 07.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Atonement, History and Narrative

I

The one reference to public, dateable history in the Apostles' Creed – «suffered under Pontius Pilate» – should be enough to alert us to one sense in which theological reflection on the atonement is engaged with the particularities of history. For if it is true that the ministry of Jesus is in an altogether unique sense the divine self-impartation to the world, it is equally true that our confession that God is indeed subject and agent in that ministry may not obliterate its ordinary historicity. Like the history of Pilate, God's history is dateable, observable, contingent, transient: «God's history is indeed an accidental truth of history, like this petty commandant».¹

But the necessity of engagement with historical particulars faces the theologian of the atonement not only in respect of the history of the atoner but also in respect of the many histories of the atoned. The atoning history² of Jesus can only be a distant and ever-receding piece of the past unless it is understood to stand in some relation to the histories of those for whom atonement has made. For all its singularity³, the ministry of Jesus is not a clearly-circumscribed event isolated from previous and subsequent events. It is not simple but complex and manifold, referring both backwards and forwards.

Partly this is because Jesus' history shares the inter-related nature of any historical event. To give anything like full attention to this point would

¹ K. Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (ET, London, 1949), 109. Cf. id., *Credo* (ET, London, 1964) 79–82.

² I speak of the «atoning history» to avoid driving a wedge between the events of the passion and the remainder of Jesus' human life. Whilst the NT clearly identifies the cross as the critical moment in the work of atonement (1 Cor 1, 23; Gal 6, 14; Eph 2, 16; Col 1, 20), it remains true that the cross effected atonement only by virtue of who Jesus Christ was, that is, by virtue of who he had become through his history. Thus the Hebr. sees Jesus' human history as one of the essential conditions of his «more excellent» priesthood (Heb 2, 10, 14–18; 5, 7–10). Moreover, the suffering of the son is no isolated incident at the end of his history. It is extensive throughout the incarnate life. There is profound truth in the credal abbreviation of Jesus' life to the one word: *passus*. See here R.S. Wallace, *The Atoning Death of Christ* (London, 1981), 92–106.

³ For some recent and very probing analysis of the singularity of Jesus' history, see D. M. MacKinnon, *Prolegomena to Christology*, *JThS* 33 (1982) 146–60.

require a treatment of problems of event-individuation – of problems, that is, pertaining to the precise identification of the perimeters of an event⁴. It would also require discussion of the way in which all historical particulars are bound up with their «effective history», with the tradition of effects and interpretation which they evoke.⁵ Such discussions lie outside the scope of the present essay, which limits itself to three observations on the need for close attention not only to Jesus' history but also to the histories of the atoned. *First*, such attention is incumbent upon the theologian if his doctrine of the atonement is to be rendered intelligible in contexts widely dispersed and very far removed from the original occurrence of Jesus' history. *Second*, if a doctrine of the atonement contains a «subjective» as well as an «objective» component – as I suggest it should – then questions concerning the human realisation of the atonement come to occupy a position of some prominence. And *third*, the profound interrelation between the doctrines of the work of Christ and of the Church presses the theologian of the atonement to show how our understanding of the character of Christ's work is bound up with our understanding of the church as the sphere where that work is effective.

This essay seeks to suggest, then, that one of the criteria of adequacy for a doctrine of the atonement is the seriousness with which it engages with historical particulars. A doctrine of the atonement might be judged to be more adequate to its field of explanation the more it incorporates a sense of the sheer phenomenality of both the *illic et tunc* of Jesus' past and also the *hic et nunc* of the present context of understanding, and especially of the church.

II

The New Testament itself does not allow us to lose sight of the perilously particular character of the «one-for-all» atoning history of Jesus: «Christ also died for sins, once for all, that he might bring us to God»⁶. Here, as

⁴ Cf. D. Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, 1980), esp. 163–87; M. Brand, D. Walton (eds.), *Action Theory* (Dordrecht, 1976), esp. 133–96; J.J. Thomson, *Actions and Other Events* (Ithaca, 1977).

⁵ See, classically, H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (ET, London, ²1979) 267–74.

⁶ I Pet 3.18

elsewhere in the New Testament⁷, the use of ἐφάπαξ (with its corollary ἅπαξ) serves to advertise the fact that the divine act of salvation in Jesus is not to be sublimed into a more general truth of which his historical ministry and death are merely the instantiation. God's saving intention is not simply expressed but actualised in the story of Jesus. And, moreover, that story is not one of the descent of a demigod, secure from the contingencies of ordinary history. Jesus is a man exposed to all the conditions of our temporality. It is of this man that we say that he is «God with us», the proclaimer and mediator of reconciliation with God.

But if we are here faced with «the scandal of particularity» in an acute way, it is because so much rests on so little. For whilst the New Testament insists on the «once-for-all» character of Jesus' atoning work, it also insists that this event has cosmic effects. God's purpose is «through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross»⁸. The history of the atoner is thus at once a history of the most dense particularity and the most widely ramified universality.

Yet in this duality the New Testament material contains the seeds of a problem with which theological reflection must concern itself. In seeking theologically to appropriate the witness of the New Testament at this point, the danger exists that the universal scope of the atoning history swallows up any sense of its particularity. As soon as stress is laid on the «central significance» of the atoning act, upon its «cosmic effects» or its «universal implications»⁹, the sheer historical factuality of Jesus' life and death may be lost sight of, so that we begin to deal, not so much with a history and its effects as with an idea and its exemplification.

This is preeminently the case in Hegel's treatment of the atonement in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*¹⁰. Here the death of Christ is not irreducible but rather an event which dramatises and instances a reconciliation in which the historical event – however powerful the fascination it exercised over Hegel's imagination – is to be sublated from the level of

⁷ The relevant passages are discussed in TDNT I 381–4; NIDNTT II 716–9. Cf also M. Hengel, *The Atonement* (ET, London, 1981) 47, 51.

⁸ Col 1.20. Cf. Eph 1.10; Phil 2.10; II Cor 5.19.

⁹ One of the most powerful treatments of this theme is K. Heim, *Jesus the World's Perfecter* (ET, Edinburgh, 1959).

¹⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (ET, London, 1895), III 93f.

Vorstellung to that of *Begriff*.¹¹ But a movement away from the historical can be traced elsewhere than in speculative idealism. E. Brunner, for example, writes that

«The Atonement is not history ... This event does not belong to the historical plane. It is super-history; it lies in the dimension which no historian knows insofar as he is merely an historian. It is an «event» which is only an «event» for faith ... It is not a fact which has its place in world-history. It would be absurd to say: in the year 30 the atonement of the world took place. But we can say: this event, which those who know history tell us probably took place about the year 30, is the same as that which we know through faith as the Divine Act of Atonement».¹²

At best, the relationship between the atoning act of God and the history of Jesus is here understood as one of coincidence: as such, the atonement belongs to a realm other than that of Tiberius and Herod, Pilate and Caiaphas and Jesus.

Something of the same more can often be observed in discussions of the relation between the historical atoning act and the eternal salvific purposes of God for men of all times. V. Taylor, for example, asks «How can the death of Christ, as an event in history and in time, be related to the eternal reconciling purpose of God for all men, in all ages and in all circumstances?».¹³ Its answer runs:

«... the Atonement is richer and fuller than anything we can observe in history and time. It must be eternal in character ... He is in truth the very Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world ... Here faith rests on a work which is eternal, operative always and before the son of God takes flesh and dies upon the tree. The Incarnation, culminating in death, is the expression in time of the Eternal Sacrifice within the heart of God».¹⁴

Certainly a study of Taylor's work shows his willingness to hold fast to the connexions between the ministry of Jesus and the purposes of God. Yet

¹¹ On Hegel here, see H. Küng, *Menschwerdung Gottes* (Freiburg, 1970); E. Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt* (Tübingen, 1977) 83–132; J. Yerkes, *The Christology of Hegel* (Missoula, 1978). On the significance of historical contingency for Hegel, see E. Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought* (Bloomington, 1967); B. T. Wilkins, *Hegel's Philosophy of History* (Ithaca, 1974); D. Henrich, «Hegels Theorie über den Zufall», *Kant-Studien* 50 (1958) 131–48.

¹² E. Brunner, *The Mediator* (ET, Philadelphia, 1947) 504f. Cf. D. M. Baillie, *God was in Christ* (London, 1948) 190–7.

¹³ V. Taylor, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching* (London, 1958) 212. Cf. his *The Cross of Christ* (London, 1956) 1–10.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 214.

if his answer just quoted is unsatisfactory, it is because it imperils that ἐφάπαξ in which God realizes his purpose ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν. Atonement is an «eternal truth», of which the history of Jesus is the supreme, final, but not wholly primordial instance.¹⁵

Whatever the motives of such attempts to relate Jesus' historical existence to the eternal purposes of God, it is difficult to escape the sense that they achieve their ends only by loosening their grip on the sheerly factual nature of Jesus' life and death. It is of course, important to insist that it is the deed of Christ and not any interpretative category such as «atonement» which is ultimately primitive. Nevertheless, the cost of such insistence can sometimes be the loss of a sense that in this identifiable stretch of human history, brutally ended in brutal times¹⁶, the work of atonement was wrought. The history of Jesus to be understood as the *essentia dei* and not as a simulacrum of the divine, an image not in the end possessed of the substantial properties of that which it signifies:

«Always there has been besetting temptation to convert deed into idea, to fail properly to do justice to what is involved in finding the very foundation of human excellence in a raw piece of history. So the cutting edge of the doctrine is blunted by refusal to recall the concrete detail of the events with which it deals».¹⁷

It is MacKinnon's emphasis on the need for a doctrine of the atonement «to recall the concrete detail of the events» which I wish to take up here for if a manner of approaching that doctrine is to be found which might enable the theologian stoutly to adhere to the particularity of Jesus' human history, I suggest that it may be found in attention to narrative. There can be little doubt that appeals to narrative as theologically fruitful may prove to be both conceptually flaccid and unable fully to achieve what they promise. Thus, for example, calls for a return to «narrative innocence» in treating the historical content of Christian affirmations¹⁸ do not solve but merely sidestep complex epistemological issues. Again, we may be justly suspicious of «narrative Christologies» in which assertions about the

¹⁵ Similar to Taylor here are D. M. Baillie, *op. cit.* (n. 12) 190 f.; J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London, 1966), 290–2.

¹⁶ For a recent reminder, see M. Hengel, *Crucifixion* (ET, London, 1977).

¹⁷ D. M. MacKinnon, «Atonement and Tragedy» in *id.*, *Borderlands of Theology* (London, 1968) 103. Cf. *id.*, «Subjective and Objective Conceptions of Atonement» in: F. G. Healey (ed.), *Prospect for Theology*. (London, 1966) 169–82, esp. 173 f.

¹⁸ E. g. H. Weinrich, *Narrative Theology*, *Concilium* 5/9 (1973) 48–57; J. N. Hart, *Theological Method and Imagination* (New York, 1977) 162–254.

personality of Jesus are read off from the texts in a way which exalts the synchronic (such as the final form of the parables) without raising questions about their diachronic tradition history.¹⁹ Narrative may not be a particularly useful tool in getting purchase on problems concerning the historical component of Christian assertions. But it may nevertheless be of very great service in ensuring that there does not occur the kind of sublation of Jesus' history to which we have referred. And it may be so in two senses.

First, narrative is a way of accomplishing an identity-description of a particular historical agent.²⁰ Narrative language has, in other words, functions analogous to those of the proper name insofar as it makes an identifying reference to a particular.²¹ But it identifies personal agents in a manner that cannot without irreparable damage be translated into terms other than itself. Thus in a doctrine of the atonement, the personal identity of the atoner is to be rendered in narrative terms, by rehearsing his biography, tracing the movements of his history. And in describing Jesus in this way, we are implicitly refusing any suggestion that his history is less than primordial, and so are asserting that his identity can only be grasped in and with the actualities of his life-story. The more we shift towards the propositional, the more readily we translate out of the temporal categories of the evangelical narratives, the less secure of our grasp of Jesus' *Istigkeit*, of that which made him into what he was. By shifting from the deed to the idea, a doctrine of the atonement for which narrative is not of prime significance fails to convey the insight vouchsafed in the gospel texts.

The second point is closely connected. Narrative is a way of drawing attention to the sheer phenomenality of the man Jesus. It is a persistent danger for doctrines of the atonement that they tend to suppress or at least too swiftly to pass over the rawness of Jesus' history and the brutality of its end. Because doctrines of the atonement tend to envisage Jesus' history as a

¹⁹ E.g. J. D. Crossan, *In Parables*. (New York, 1973); id., *The Dark Interval* (Niles, 1975) 89–122; D. O. Via, *The Parables*. (Philadelphia, 1967) 190–205.

²⁰ See here the pioneering work of H. W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia, 1975), along with his *Theological Reflections on the Gospel Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection*, *The Christian Scholar* 49 (1966) 263–306 and *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, 1974). Frei's work has been developed in, e.g. D. H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (London, 1975) 32–55; G. A. Lindbeck, *Theologische Methode und Wissenschaftstheorie*, *ThR as Realistic Narrative*, *JES* 17 (1980) 81–5; R. H. King, *The Meaning of God* (London, 1974), 108–13. See also D. F. Ford, *Barth and God's Story* (Frankfurt/M, 1982), with his essay: *Barth's Interpretation of the Bible in*: S. W. Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth. Studies of his Theological Method* (Oxford, 1979) 55–87.

²¹ P. F. Strawson, *Individuals* (London, 1959) 16.

significant, integrated whole, the erratic and the chaotic are easily excised. But as J. B. Metz has pointed out,²² one of the functions of narrative is to keep alive the *memoria passionis*: to ensure that a dogmatic scheme does not obscure or underplay the evil to which the passion stories testify. Narrative refuses the synthetic; it drags our attention back to detail too readily absorbed in propositional descriptions. As Schopenhauer reminds us, in narrative as in history, «We see the mind occupied exclusively with the particular thing as such».²³

A theology of the atonement is thus reflexive upon the evangelical narratives which furnish a primary idiom for the identification and description of Jesus as personal subject and agent. Certainly theology is not itself narrative: it is not story-telling but a second-order exercise, a reflexive, critical account of the Christian μύθος.²⁴ But as such an exercise it may not supplant the narrative material which forms the object of its inquiry. A theology of the atonement is constantly referred to this *donum*, by which its conceptual representations must be broken down and refashioned.

«The doctrine is the story and the story is the doctrine».²⁵ To emphasise this is not to fall prey to the error of collapsing all the biblical material to one literary category, suggesting that narrative is the only mode in which truth is conveyed there. Much biblical material pertaining to the theology of the atonement is argumentative and propositional. But as such it is not free-standing: it refers us to events.²⁶ Again, to say this is not to canvass a naive contrast of the ontological and the functional. It is simply to suggest

²² J. B. Metz, «Erlösung und Emanzipation» in L. Scheffczyk (ed.) *Erlösung und Emanzipation* (Freiburg, 1973) 120–40. I have profited much from the treatment of memory in R. Williams, *Resurrection* (London, 1982).

²³ A. Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*. (ET, Oxford, 1974) II 446.

²⁴ «... it seems to me inevitable, desirable and appropriate that the primary forms of Christian speech should continue to be narrative in form ... But what is needed as well as that primary level of narrative discourse ... is a level of strictly theoretical discourse appropriate to the particular cultural context» (N. L. A. Lash, in: D. Martin, J. O. Mills, W. S. F. Pickering (ed.), *Sociology and Theology* (Brighton, 1980) 42.

²⁵ E. Brunner, *Op. cit.*, (n. 12) 521.

²⁶ Both Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* III. 46. 3, 4, 10, 11; 47. 4) and Calvin (*Institutes* II. 16. 5, 6) seek to root soteriology in the details of the passion narratives; but both sometimes give the impression that the details of the story simply «illustrate» doctrinal points (the same is also true of e.g., J. McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement* (London, 1959) 242–54. A very powerful correlation of doctrine and story can be found in H. U. von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale* in: J. Feiner, M. Löhrer (ed.), *Mysterium Salutis*. III/2 (Einsiedeln, 1969) 133–326, who catches well the fusion of the doctrinal and the concrete in the gospel narratives.

how a clearer understanding of the role of the propositional might be gained by a recognition that propositions analyze, abbreviate and condense complexes of events, and how in so doing they are parasitic upon those events and not ultimately primitive.

III

This narrative reiteration of the ἐφάπαξ, however much it may introduce a sense of the substantiality of Jesus' history, needs nevertheless to be complemented by a sense of the substantiality of the histories of the atoned. Indeed, there is a danger that we so emphasise the discreteness and particularity of Jesus' atoning death that it becomes a piece of the past which is beyond our horizons, no longer significant for the lived present. We run the risk of a theology of the atonement in which, as Hegel said, «Christ died so long ago for our sins that it is hardly true any more»²⁷. A viable theology of the atonement one which takes seriously the need for intelligibility in the contexts in which it is articulated must be insistent upon the particularities of the histories of the atoned. The next three sections will advance three arguments to support this contention.

First, the need to take into account the histories of the atoned arises from a consideration of the nature of understanding and of the appropriation of meaning: «All understanding has the present existential experience as its hermeneutical situation».²⁸ Whatever judgement we may now pass upon older works on the atonement which sought to make that doctrine intelligible within the philosophical or cultural idioms of their day,²⁹ their value for us lies not so much in their particular ways of attempting that task as in their pressing upon us that that task cannot be ignored. We no longer share the categories of, say, personal idealism; but we do inherit the need to be alert to the present context of our discourse about the atonement.

The subjective conditions of the appropriation of the atoning work of Christ can only be ignored at cost of intelligibility. This hermeneutical point is, of course, particularly true in the area of soteriology, where the anthropological value of theological affirmations is at the centre of atten-

²⁷ J. Hoffmeister (ed.), *Dokumente zu Hegels Entwicklung* (Stuttgart, 1936) II 358.

²⁸ E. Schillebeeckx, *Towards a Catholic Use of Hermeneutics*, in: *God the Future of Man* (ET, London, 1969, 1–49) 28. Cf. id., *The Context and Value of Faith-Talk in: The Understanding of Faith* (ET, London, 1974) 14–19.

²⁹ E.g. R. C. Moberly, *Atonement and Personality* (London, 1901); L. Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Atonement* (London, 1951).

tion. D. Wiederkehr has reminded us that «if theology does not manage in soteriology to articulate its concerns in such a way that man, with his questions and aspirations, can see himself addressed and understood, then whatever else it may have to say is consigned to irrelevance and unreality».³⁰ To fail to take up this hermeneutical demand in all its stringency would be to envisage the atoning act as an event which so bears within itself a whole world of meaning that the mediations of that meaning in particular human situations would be ignored.

To speak in these terms is not to underestimate the extent to which meaning is trans-subjective. A purely private account of meaning would be inadequate on at least three counts. First, it would ignore the degree to which transcultural and transhistorical understanding is possible. Here the theologian may profit much from the – admittedly overdrawn – criticisms made by E. Gellner³¹ against the «apotheosis of the untidy, the ad hoc, the context-bound»³² in sociological theorists such as P. Winch³³ and A.R. Louch³⁴ who have sought to apply concepts such as «language-game» or «following a rule» to social science.³⁵ In theology, this kind of historical atomism³⁶ can often lack a sense of the bonds between meaning and tradition as well as of the degree to which it is possible to speak of the Christian tradition as an «ecumenism in time» in which the isolation of past and present may to some extent be overcome.³⁷

Second, meaning is trans-subjective because it is social, embedded in communication between selves in language. Meaning presupposes public criteria which emerge in the use of language, identifying its referent and

³⁰ D. Wiederkehr, *Belief in Redemption*. (ET, London, 1979), p. XI.

³¹ E. Gellner, *Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences* (London, 1973), esp. 47–77; *Legitimation of Belief* (Cambridge, 1974) 19–23, 129–48; *Spectacles and Predicaments* (Cambridge, 1979) 65–102, 135–47.

³² *Spectacles and Predicaments*, 102.

³³ P. Winch, *Understanding a Primitive Society* in: D.Z. Phillips (ed.), *Religion and Understanding* (Oxford, 1967) 9–42; *The Idea of a Social Science* (London, 1958).

³⁴ A.R. Louch, *Explanation and Human Action* (Oxford, 1966).

³⁵ For further criticism here, see I. Jarvie, *Concepts and Society* (London, 1972) 3–66, 147–72; S.H. Holtzmann, C.M. Leich (eds.), *Wittgenstein: to Follow a Rule* (London, 1981); G. MacDonald, P. Pettit, *Semantics and Social Science* (London, 1981) 14–54.

³⁶ E.g. D.E. Nineham, *New Testament Interpretation in an Historical Age* in: id., *Explorations in Theology* 1 (London, 1977) 145–65.

³⁷ Cf. here A. M. Allchin's trilogy *The World is a Wedding* (London, 1978); *The Kingdom of Love and Knowledge* (London, 1979) and especially *The Dynamic of Tradition* (London, 1981), esp. 1–35. My remarks here should be balanced against those on «historical monism».

setting limits to the possible range of interpretations of our speech.³⁸ In the case of the theology of the atonement this must mean, for example, a refusal of Bultmann's limitation of the «salvation-occurrence» to the event in which the individual hearer of the kerygma is accosted and compelled to decide.³⁹ Bultmann succeeds only in evacuating Paul's language of all reference to public criteria of meaning which alone guard it from regress into solipsism.

Third, meaning is trans-subjective because in genuine theological thinking the mind of the subject is constantly referred to realities beyond himself. Perhaps the most confident recent reiteration of this is T.F. Torrance's work on theological rationality,⁴⁰ notably his stress on the inherent rationality of God as active Logos who bestows himself on the knowing subject, breaking down inappropriate habits of mind, and delivering him from self involvement and ultimate meaninglessness.

Meaning, then, is trans-subjective because it is bound up with the linguistic, social and public structures of man's existence as a transitive being referred beyond himself. Nevertheless, these trans-subjective and transcendent features should not stifle the subjective without which the objective would remain the abstract. To grasp the meaning of something is, as Heidegger used, to understand «something as something».⁴¹ There is no pure perception behind the «as», behind the «Wozu»⁴² of the objective whose meaning we seek to grasp. There is here something of what Wittgenstein expressed in a different idiom with his famous words «Only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning».⁴³ Both Heidegger and Wittgenstein serve to alert us to the extent to which the historical stance of

³⁸ See M. Dummett's structures against «idiolect» in: *The Social Character of Meaning*, in: *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London, 1978) 420–30.

³⁹ *Theology of the New Testament I* (ET, London, 1952) 292–306.

⁴⁰ In such treatises as *Theological Science* (Oxford, 1969) and *God and Rationality* (Oxford, 1971).

⁴¹ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (ET, Oxford, 1962) 189. Cf. M. King, *Heidegger's Philosophy* (Oxford, 1964) 6–14.

⁴² M. Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p. 190. Here I make no judgement about the charge that Heidegger lacks emphasis on an objective order of being behind the «Wozu». For criticism along these lines, T.F. Torrance's lengthy and perceptive review of the ET of *Sein und Zeit*: *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 15 (1964), pp. 471–86.

⁴³ L. Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (ET, Oxford, 1967) para. 173. Cf. *ibid.*, para. 238: *Philosophical Grammar* (ET, Oxford, 1974) para. 107; *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford, 1969) 4f. On the overlap of Heidegger and Wittgenstein in this area, see A.C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Exeter, 1980) 376.

the subject needs to be brought into play in discussions of meaning. Meaning cannot be divorced from the history of the process of understanding, and reference to the trans-subjective and transcendent should not be construed as somehow cancelling out the historical conditions of our dealings with the world.

A narrative doctrine of the atonement may never sit loose on the *memoria Jesu*. But as Schillebeeckx has written, «The history of Jesus is not at an end when we have said what the New Testament tells us about it. At that point *we ourselves* have not yet been touched, we who here and now must hand on this history to coming generations». ⁴⁴ Our reporting of the atoning history of Jesus must keep an eye firmly on the present, for «along with the primary reality of the offer constituted by Jesus, and in and through Jesus alive in the church with its living remembrance of Jesus of Nazareth, interpretation from within the current situation is a further constitutive element for what we refer to as God's disclosure of salvation in Jesus Christ». ⁴⁵

IV

My second argument urging the inclusion of study of the histories of the atoned in a doctrine of the atonement takes its rise from the need properly to relate «objective» and «subjective» in atonement theology. In brief, I suggest that an emphasis on the atonement as «objective» and «finished» must be balanced by an account of the subjective reality of its appropriation if it is not to issue in the alienation of the divine from the human. The point can be clarified over against two ways in which the significance of the human realisation of the atonement might be obscured.

The first concerns the universal effectiveness of the work of atonement. A theology of the atonement in which the atoning history is envisaged as objectively accomplishing the salvation of all men irrespective of their subjective response may easily compromise the substantiality and definitive significance of man's subjective actuality. In effect, «universalism» introduces a duality into human history: the «manifest» level of our subjectivity is ontologically and so definitely inferior to the «latent» level,

⁴⁴ E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ* (ET, London, 1980) 643.

⁴⁵ E. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* (ET, London, 1979), 62. Cf. id., *The Bible and Theology in: Revelation and Theology* (ET, London, 1967) 184–214.

objectively determined by Christ's atoning work. In thus locating the most significant stratum of human life at a level beyond that of subjective agency, it must inevitably sit loose on the importance of all the particulars of the human historical scene. «Universalism» introduces a «holistic» or «monist» account of human history into the doctrine of the atonement, envisaging man's historical experience as capable of yielding a pattern in which the sharper discontinuities can be reconciled in a vision of the totality.⁴⁶

Three comments are in order here. First, a vision of the *grandes lignes* of history, it is exceedingly difficult to incorporate a sense of the substantiality of all discrete particulars. The implicit appeal to the distinction between the manifest and the latent is inevitably grounded in a decision that not all particulars are of the same significance. And because selectivity has to be exercised in this way, there may easily occur the transcendence of the particular in the service of the overarching order. «A concrete history of mankind, if there were any, would have to be the history of all men. It would have to be the history of all human hopes, struggles and sufferings. For there is no one man more important than any other. Clearly this concrete history cannot be written. We must make abstractions, we must neglect, select. But with this we arrive at the many histories».⁴⁷ Once, indeed, a decision has been made in favour of «universalism», it is difficult to conceive of what could count as evidence against it, so effectively is the counterfactual suppressed.

But if «universalism» is thus morally questionable on account of its relegation of some histories to insignificance,⁴⁸ it is so, second, because of a lack of epistemological modesty. Working with an ideal of predictability, «universalism» readily assumes that a coherent and overarching account of the whole of human history can be given.⁴⁹ Yet in this, it has little sense that concepts such as order, coherence and continuity may well be as much the contribution of the knower of history as the objective characteristics of the

⁴⁶ In defence of historical pluralism, see W. James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909=Cambridge, 1977), D. M. MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics* (Cambridge 1974). In defence of monism, see E. Gellner, *Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences*, 1–17; id., *Legitimation of Belief*, 1–23.

⁴⁷ K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies II* (London, 1966) 270.

⁴⁸ Cf. K. R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London, 1960); I. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, 1969). See also the refusal of the synthetic in T. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (ET, London, 1974); id., *Negative Dialectics* (ET, London, 1973).

⁴⁹ Again, see Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*.

known.⁵⁰ Christian theology is indeed committed to the belief that, under the purposes of God, history is neither random nor chaotic. Yet such a commitment is very different from the claim to be able unambiguously to discern in a particular instance of our historical experience the attributes which clearly fit it into an all-embracing order. And it is also very different from the claim to be able to extrapolate from particular examples of historical order to a vision of total harmony.⁵¹

Third, the sense of the significance of all discrete particulars is especially appropriate for Christian theology in which, as we have sought to suggest, the raw particularity of Jesus' history is constantly to be brought to mind. It is one of ironies of the history of theology in our century that the catchphrase «the scandal of particularity» should owe its common currency to G. Kittel⁵², who, for all his sense of the particularity of Jesus' history, lent support to a régime in which countless individual lives were sacrificed to the vision of a new order of Volk and Führer.⁵³ The particularity of Jesus' history should heighten and not suppress the sense of the particularity and preciousness of the histories of other men. «Christianity,» writes Ricoeur, «has an instinctive distrust of systematic philosophies of history which would place in our hands the key of intelligibility».⁵⁴

The second way in which a doctrine of the atonement may effect a transcendence of the histories of the atoned is by envisaging the atonement as reaching its soteriological goal in the deification of man. It is often pointed out⁵⁵ that doctrines of θεοποίησις could be linked to monophysi-

⁵⁰ The pioneering work here is A. C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge, 1965). See also H. M. Baumgartner, *Kontinuität und Geschichte* (Frankfurt/M, 1972); F. Platzer, *Geschichte, Heilsgeschichte, Hermeneutik* (Bern, 1979).

⁵¹ Cf. here N. L. A. Lash, «These things were here but the beholder wanting» in: id., *Theology on Dover Beach*, 150–63, esp. 161–3.

⁵² G. Kittel, *The Jesus of History*, in: G. K. A. Bell, A. Deissmann, (ed.), *Mysterium Christi* (London, 1930) 31–49.

⁵³ See Kittel's book *Die Judenfrage* (Stuttgart 1933). On Kittel, see R. P. Ericksen, *Theologian in the Third Reich: the Case of Gerhard Kittel*, *Journal of Contemporary History* 13 (1977) 595–622; D. M. MacKinnon, «Tillich, Frege, Kittel: Some Reflections on a Dark Theme» in *Explorations in Theology* 5 (London, 1979) 151–65; R. Gutteridge, *Open Thy Mouth for the Dumb!* (Oxford, 1976).

⁵⁴ P. Ricoeur, *Christianity and the Meaning of History* in: *History and Truth* (ET, Evanston, 1965, 81–97) 95. Cf. id., *The History of Philosophy and Historicity* in: ibid, 63–77, and Popper's remarks, *The Open Society II*, 269–74.

⁵⁵ E.g. by H. E. W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption* (London, 1952) 82 F.; D. Ritschl, «Hippolytus' Conception of Deification» in: *Konzepte. Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Frankfurt/M, 1976) 11–20; B. Drewery, «Deification» in P. Brooks (ed.), *Christian Spirituality* (London, 1975) 33–62.

tism insofar as, by assimilating the atoned to Jesus' divinity, they fail adequately to cope with his humanity. In anthropological terms, the corollary here is that the atonement initiates, not so much a process of which the consummation is the transcendence of historical existence as a process in which man's historicity is invested with massive significance: «... before talk of our deification ..., change of our «substance», comes the ethic of our response to what God has done for us in Christ».⁵⁶

It is, indeed, at this point that discussions concerning the relation of «objective» and «subjective» come into their own. It is certainly true that the immense value of emphasis on the objectivity of atonement is its reminded to us of the soteriological *extra nos*, not contingent upon man for its realisation. From this perspective, Knox's statement that «the Cross was not less real – or less really the Cross – because faith had a part in creating it. On the contrary, it had its own distinctive reality only on this account. The Cross *was* the Cross only in the context which the life of the primitive community provided»⁵⁷ is disquieting.⁵⁸ But however strenuously we assert this objectivity, there exists equal need to render fully thematic the subjective actualities of the response of man. There are no doubt considerable defects in so-called «subjective» theories of the atonement originating in Origen and Abelard and most powerfully mediated to the modern era by H. Rashdall⁵⁹: an incipient confusion of the divine and the human work; a light treatment of human depravity; a loosening of Christ's function as moral exemplar from its ground in the objective accomplishment of salvation. Nevertheless, it is from this tradition that we may learn that the atonement affects the warp and woof of our individual moral existences. As J.K. Mozley wrote, «The Atonement, whatever it be, must directly affect man in his moral life. Whatever else it may be, it is only completed as it functions within man, as it is seen to be the at-one-ment of man with God».⁶⁰

Certainly under sustained interrogation Mozley's statement shows signs of strain: in emphasising the subjective he tends to compromise the finished nature of Christ's stoning work, neglecting the fact that in the

⁵⁶ G. S. Wakefield in his Editorial Epilogue to E. C. Hoskyns and F. N. Davey, *Crucifixion – Resurrection* (London 1981) 1364.

⁵⁷ J. Knox, *The Death of Christ* (London, 1959), 107.

⁵⁸ Cf. D. M. MacKinnon, «Subjective and Objective».

⁵⁹ H. Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* (London, 1919) 360f., 433–64. In criticism, see O. C. Quick, *Doctrines of the Creed* (London, 1938) 223f.

⁶⁰ J. K. Mozley, *The Doctrine of the Atonement* (London, 1915) 211. Cf. E. Brunner, *op. cit.* (n. 12) 528f.

subjective, we move not in the realm of Christ's work itself, which remains inalienably and imprescriptibly his, but in the realm of the discovery and application of its meaning. Yet the tasks of discovery and application of meaning cannot be laid aside, for the finished work of Christ is bound up with the human response it evokes and through which it is refracted.⁶¹

It is perhaps something of this which led V. Taylor to reject the language of substitution in the theology of the atonement. However we may judge his case or however we may defend the necessity of such language,⁶² it is nevertheless true that Taylor's demand for a correlation of objective facticity and subjective response is one which the theologian of the atonement ignores at his peril. «What is required is a category of representative action which, far from suggesting a purely external work of Christ passively accepted, includes within itself both a transcendent deed of Christ on which redemption rests, and, at the same time, a human response so intimately related to it that, with no claim to personal merit, man can find true reconciliation with God».⁶³ Taylor serves to remind us that here, as always in the theology of grace, the use of objective categories needs carefully to be guarded from issuing in an idealist anticipation of human action in which man's relation to his own history is disturbed.

V

My third argument builds on the second by emphasising the coinherence of the history of Jesus and the history of the church. We have already noted that part of the logical architecture of Jesus' history is the history of its effects. The dogmatic counterpart of this observation is the way in which the person and work of Christ are interwoven with the reality of the church. S. Sykes has suggested that the notion of «the character of Christ» includes reference not only to the «historical character of Jesus» but also to that character «in the cooperative activity of individuals outside the datespan

⁶¹ See here C. F. D. Moule's careful statement in: *The Sacrifice of Christ* (London, 1956) 19–41.

⁶² Cf. F. W. Camfield, *The Idea of Substitution in the Doctrine of the Atonement* SJTh 1 (1948, 282–93); J. I. Packer, *What did the Cross achieve? The logic of penal substitution*, Tyndale Bulletin 25 (1974), 3–45; W. Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man* (ET, London, 1968) 258–69. Compare H. Nieie's painstaking critique of Pannenberg in *The Doctrine of the Atonement in the Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Berlin, 1979).

⁶³ V. Taylor, *op. cit.* (n. 13) 179. Cf. D. M. Baillie, *op. cit.*, (n. 12), 200.

of Jesus' historical existence». ⁶⁴ This is a fruitful suggestion, and one with wide ramifications in our understanding of the work of Christ as well as of his person. For Christ is not merely a figure from the past who «lives on» through his influence, after the manner of Socrates or Sigmund Freud. He is risen, ascended and present in the church which is his body. And if, indeed, «Christ as person, is present in the church» ⁶⁵, then discussion of the nature of his person and work can only proceed alongside discussion of the church as that sphere of worldly reality in which the benefits of Christ's finished work are effectual.

Consequently, theories of the atonement which neglect the present horizon of the appropriation of Christ's work are deficient at a dogmatic level. They tend to conceive of the presence of Christ in terms of «influence» or «cause», and so ultimately as a «nonpersonal power». ⁶⁶ And they tend to drive a wedge between the doctrine of Christ's work and the doctrine of the church, thus failing to catch the «ecclesial» character of talk of the atonement. ⁶⁷

This argument is reinforced by the consideration that the story of Jesus serves to identify not only the agent of salvation but also its recipients. In his recent and very stimulating reflections upon the Apostles' Creed entitled *Creed and Personal Identity* ⁶⁸, D. B. Harned has argued that a primary function of credal language is that of furnishing an «identity-avowal» of the Christian in the church. What is most impressive in his study is his insistence that to talk of the creed in such terms is emphatically not to reduce theological propositions to propositions about the believing self, or to propositions co-ordinated only with the church's self-understanding. ⁶⁹

⁶⁴ S. W. Sykes, *The Essence of Christianity*, *Religious Studies* 7 (1971) 291–305, 300. See also his book *Christian Theology Today* (Oxford, 1971) 121–48. Some of Sykes' points are developed by I. H. Dalferth, *Religiöse Rede von Gott* (Munich, 1981) 361–3.

⁶⁵ D. Bonhoeffer, *Christology* (ET, London, 1978), p. 43. Bonhoeffer here relies on his understanding of Christ as «Transcendent person: see *ibid.*, 27 f and especially *Sanctorum Communio* (ET, London, 1963).

⁶⁶ D. Bonhoeffer, *Christology* 44.

⁶⁷ To say this is not to prejudge the difficult question of the ontological status of St. Paul's metaphor of the church as the «body of Christ». Nor is it to collapse the singularity of Jesus' history into that of the church (after the manner of, for example, J. Knox in *The Church and the Reality of Christ* (London, 1963) esp. 80–120). My earlier emphasis on the particularity of Jesus' history was intended as a refusal of idealism in which the deed of Christ would be less than primordial: it was not intended as a denial of the resurrection of Christ nor of his present relation to the church.

⁶⁸ D. B. Harned, *Creed and Personal Identity* (Edinburgh, 1981). See esp. 7–24.

⁶⁹ For a refusal of such an interpretation of credal statements, see T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Oxford, 1969) 1 f.

Rather it is to underline how the believer's sense of identity is formed by the objective realities to which he is referred, and how those realities are nevertheless mediated through the self. The creed is not, he writes, «an expression of the self's own commitments that finally directs attention toward the subjectivity of the individual. On the contrary, precisely because it is an identity-avowal its words orient us towards the objective statement that it presupposes, direct our gaze towards that with which we are now identified, and tell of the indisputable power of this narrative to transform personal existence».⁷⁰

My contention, accordingly, is that the atoning work of Christ is understood along these lines – as I believe it should be – the theologian is thereby committed to rendering an account of those who find their identity through Christ's saving work.⁷¹ The history of the atonement includes not only the story of Christ but also the very many and very diverse stories which make up the human reality of the church. Adequately to describe the work of atonement would involve us in attention not only to the history of Jesus but also to the innumerable biographies with which that history intersects and which it takes up into itself. There could hardly be a more resolute hostility to abstraction.

This essay has been concerned with prolegomena. It is not so much a study in substantive dogma as an attempt to isolate one feature which should pervade a doctrine of the atonement: a sense of the «naked factu-²alities of time and place».⁷² Our attention is ceaselessly called to the details of the historical scene, whether in seeking to grapple with the facticity of Jesus' life and death or with the manifold dispersions of the histories for which he made atonement. If there is a final suggestion here, it is that theological realism, concern for what is the case, is two-directional, concerned both with the objectivity of God's act in Christ and with the scatter of man's historical experience. Viewed from either direction, «The Atonement is, simply, the divine tribute paid to the inexorable logic of *facts*».⁷³

J. B. Webster, Durham

⁷⁰ Op cit 21 f. Cf. Sykes' comment that the story of the incarnation «has lodged itself in the teaching and worship of the church in such a way that in its rehearsal and realization the story of the church's own identity is proclaimed as included in that of its Lord» (The Incarnation as the foundation of the Church in: M. D. Goulder (ed.), *Incarnation ad Myth. The Debate Continued* (London, 1979) 115–27, 127).

⁷¹ «One died for all, therefore all died. To say this is to describe the Church of God» (A. M. Ramsey, *The Gospel and The Catholic Church* (London, 1936) 27; cf. 3–42).

⁷² A Burgess, *Earthly Powers* (Harmondsworth, 1981) 46.

⁷³ H. Scott Holland, *The Atonement* in id., *Creeds and Critics* (London, 1918) 51–65, 61.