Forgotten Atonement

by Miguel X. Chavarria

Synopsis

Current church growth often occurs without spiritual depth. Too often the contemporary Church has become a place where individuals pick and choose what they think they need in order to achieve their spiritual goals. Individuals focus on personal transformation and having a “personal relationship with Christ” in order to improve their lives. Modern Christianity is about the deeds we do rather than on what has been done on the Cross for us. The preaching of the Cross has been forgotten. It has been replaced by a moralistic message of, “What would Jesus do,” instead of, “What has Jesus done.” The modern church focus is self-centered rather than Cross-centered.

The Cross of Christ is being subtly forgotten in our Christian culture. This is the result of a watered-down gospel of works. We need to go back to the roots of the Church and the doctrine of the Apostles. Christ’s doctrine was embedded in the Law. The Apostles emulated their teacher and held to the same doctrine. On the cross, our Day of Atonement, Christ fulfilled the requirements of the law. On the cross He served as the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. According to Jewish Law, on the Day of Atonement a Jubilee was proclaimed. This was a time of celebration from the captivity of sin, debt, and slavery. The Jubilee reflected the favor of the Lord and a supernatural reordering of God’s people. The Apostles did not forget the Day of Atonement. In fact they followed the intent of the Law and practiced a Jubilee that was made possible by the sacrifice of the Lord. Today, the Church has forgotten the Day of Atonement. There needs to be a new reformation; a reconciliation of God’s people to the
Cross and a celebration of the Jubilee among us.

THE FORGOTTEN ATONEMENT

In the account of Luke, just after the testing in the desert, Jesus returned to Galilee. He began to teach in the synagogues and His fame grew. Coming to the city of Nazareth where He grew up, Jesus entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and began to teach. He began His teaching by reading a passage in Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, Because the Lord has anointed me To bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives And freedom to prisoners; To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord (Isaiah 61: 1-2a)²

Moments after He read this passage, Jesus said, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” The synagogue members looked at Jesus and wondered, “How could a boy they saw grow up in their hometown be the Messiah?” Jesus, seeing their opposition and knowing their hearts, continued by saying; “Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown.” In a significant teaching moment, Jesus reminded them of how Israel in their disbelief did not heed God’s prophets. When the people of Israel ignored the message of Elijah and Elisha, God extended His grace to two Gentiles: a widow of Sidon and Naaman, a Syrian. When the synagogue members heard what Jesus

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¹ All scripture quoted are NASB unless otherwise noted.
said, they were filled with anger. They wanted to throw Him off a cliff. What was it that caused such hatred?

The message that the Gentiles were to find favor with God caused this reaction. The implication was that the Messiah was representing all of mankind rather than just the Jewish nation\(^3\). That was not the message that Israel was expecting to hear. Israel was looking for a mighty King Messiah to overthrow a tyrannical Roman Empire. But Jesus knew His mission. He was the anointed One who was sent to fulfill the requirements of the law by His obedient death on the Cross. His sacrifice would pave the way for the dispensation of Grace (Ephesians 3:2): “to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Ephesians 3:6).

Jesus was a devout Jew. He was a teacher that taught with authority. His life revolved around the Law of God. To any Jew the “favorable year of the Lord” would be associated with the sabbatical years and the Jubilee. John Calvin says this concerning this passage,

“To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. Many think that here the prophet makes an allusion to the Jubilee, and I have no objection to that view”\(^4\). This also gives insight concerning the statement, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled”

“that the time was now come, when it was the will of God to restore his ruined church.”\(^5\).

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My belief is that Jesus was making a reference to the Cross and a Jubilee. So, let us look into the Law of the Great Day of Atonement and the Jubilee Year.

**Sabbatical Year/Jubilee**

The Jubilee was celebrated in a 50-year cycle, after seven sabbatical years (7x7=49) and the next year was the 50th, which marks the Jubilee year. So, what is the significance of the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee? Among the Hebrews it was not only the seventh day that was sacred, but the day that began and consecrated the seventh month, the entire seventh year, and the completion of the seventh year. These seasons were all associated with the idea of rest, worship, liberty, goodwill toward man, and divine favor. Every seventh year was a Sabbath year, when ordinary agriculture was stopped (Ex 23:10-11), all debts were forgiven and all Hebrew slaves were freed.

At the end of every seven years you shall grant a remission of debts. This is the manner of remission: every creditor shall release what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother, because the Lord’s remission has been proclaimed. From a foreigner you may exact it, but your hand shall release whatever of yours is with your brother. However, there will be no poor among you, since the Lord will surely bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, (Deuteronomy 15:1-4)

This Sabbatical Year commandment had both a social and a spiritual impact. It provided for the poor and oppressed and fostered a dependence on God.

You shall thus observe My statutes and keep My judgments, so as to carry them out, that you may live securely on the land. Then the land will yield its produce,
so that you can eat your fill and live securely on it. But if you say, “What are we going to eat on the seventh year if we do not sow or gather in our crops?” then I will so order My blessing for you in the sixth year that it will bring forth the crop for three years. When you are sowing the eighth year, you can still eat old things from the crop, eating the old until the ninth year when its crop comes in. (Leviticus 25:18-22)

The Jubilee year involved a supernatural cancellation of all debt. This holy time extended the economic reordering of the Sabbatical Year to include the release of slaves and the return of land. It began with the blowing of the ram's horn on the Day of Atonement.

You shall then sound a ram’s horn abroad on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement you shall sound a horn all through your land. You shall thus consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim a release through the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you… (Leviticus 25:9-10)

This is of great significance if one holds to the premise that Jesus declared a Jubilee in the Synagogue. This theme of the Jubilee can be seen throughout the Gospel of Luke and in many of the teachings of Jesus⁶. The Jubilee and the Day of Atonement as noted in Leviticus are closely connected. In the proclamation in the synagogue, was Jesus looking ahead to His sacrifice on the Great Day of Atonement, announcing a Jubilee to all? The final atoning sacrifice liberating the world from the bondage of sin announcing a re-establishment of all things?

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Doctrine of Jesus

The doctrine of Jesus was rooted in love for the Father and people.

Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law? And He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22:36-40)

Jesus was obedient to the law. He literally fulfilled the requirements of the Law; Jesus’ teaching was centered on Him fulfilling the law.

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. (Matthew 5:17)

Some have argued that the synagogue proclamation was not a call literal call to a Jubilee because all the elements where not accomplished. I do not wish to argue this, but relate how Jesus’ teachings had Jubilee implications and that those implications were understood by the Apostles. Understanding the fulfillment of the Great Day of Atonement the principle of the Jubilee were a part of their doctrine.

And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. (Acts 2:42-44 KJV)
After Jesus died and had atoned for our sins, Matthew says, “And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (27:51a). Calvin says this of the torn veil of the temple,

Nor was it proper that the veil should be rent, until the sacrifice of expiation had been completed; for then Christ, the true and everlasting Priest, having abolished the figures of the law, opened up for us by his blood the way to the heavenly sanctuary.

After Christ’s death on the cross there was no need for any further atoning sacrifice or for any other High Priest. There was now only one High Priest, one Mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ. Jesus fulfilled the law; he did not abolish it. He removed the requirements of having to follow the Law in order to please God, establishing justification by faith alone

Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the Law. (Romans3:28)

One source puts it this way that Jesus taught

The proper way to keep any commandment was to fulfill the purpose for which it was given." For instance, Jesus taught that the Sabbath was instituted for the sake of people (Mk 2:27), and therefore picking food to eat or healing on the Sabbath was perfectly allowable. (Mk 2:23-3:5).

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Jesus sacrificial death fulfilled the purpose of the Day of Atonement. The foundation for God’s next dispensation had been accomplished. The way to God was through Jesus, the way of love the guiding principle of the Kingdom of God:

“Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law”

(Romans 13:10)

Love therefore was the guiding principle of the Apostles’ doctrine in establishing the Church of Jesus.

Concerning the call for the Jubilee some would say that the function of the Jubilee year was essentially the maintenance of social solidarity, but even so the guiding principle was God’s love. As God showed love in providing for His people by releases of debts and life provisions, Jesus taught with His life and works the true meaning of God’s love. Here are some further teachings of Jesus with Jubilee implications.

Luke 12:29-31 – The Lord will provide

And do not seek what you will eat and what you will drink, and do not keep worrying. For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek; but your Father knows that you need these things. But seek His kingdom, and these things will be added to you.

The jubilee law promised God’s provision in the sixth year until the ninth year. Could this be understood as such?

Luke 11:2-4 Lord’s Prayer – provision and forgiveness of debts

When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come ‘Give us each day our daily bread. ‘And forgive us our sins, For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.
As God provided the daily manna in the desert, God will provide also forgiveness of debt.⁹

Here is the connection of the Jubilee and the Great Day of Atonement. Jesus by His sacrifice on the Cross released us of our debt. Many have called this dispensation the Age of Grace; we could rightfully call this the favorable day of the Lord or a Jubilee. The Sacrifice on the Cross was the final sacrificed needed and a Jubilee rightly celebrated, with the Apostles carrying it out.

**Doctrine of the Apostles**

As noted Love is the motivating principle of Jesus’ teaching. This was continued in word and deed by His Disciples and articulated in the writings of the New Testament. The Cross was the center of their teachings, “but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:23). The Cross, the once and for all atonement for sin, was the focal point of their doctrine. The proclamation of the Lord’s favor, a Jubilee, became real. The Jubilee was more than a social economic reordering but a reconciliation of God’s creation something the Law could not do.

> And through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. (Colossians 1:20)

The Cross granted release from the captivity of sin the oppression that this bondage holds and the one who has held us captive,

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⁹ John Yoder, Politics of Jesus, (Grand Rapids: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 66
When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him. (Colossians 2:15)

Now understanding the significance of the Cross as the final Atonement for sin, the Apostles where to work out their faith in the new dispensation of God. What better way than adhere to a Jubilee as prescribed by the Law after the Great Day of Atonement?
The Apostles being the ambassadors of Christ initiated it in principle as an act of God’s Love. In Acts 2:42-45 we read,

And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. (KJV)

In following the doctrine of the Apostles (Jewish Christianity) needs were met (God’s provision) through the church,

And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. (Acts 4:32)

A Jubilee is precisely what would have occurred to a people adherent to the law. The “Jewish Christians” continued to be adherent to the law “for about the first ten years of Christianity, it was almost exclusively composed of Jewish converts.10 Even Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles followed purification laws when preparing to speak in the Temple

10 Tim A. Troutman, Christian Worship in the First Century, Call to Communion Reformation meet Rome
Acts 21:14-27). The point being the doctrine of the Apostles was Jewish (Luke 24:44-45). That is why they observed the proclamation of a Jubilee after the death and resurrection of Christ, the greatest event in human history. So how can the teaching and the observance of the Jubilee affect us today in living out our salvation?

Reformation of the Church

When Jesus began His Church, His vision was for a true community. Starting on the day of Pentecost and being equipped with the teaching of their Lord and in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles began the commission of building His Church. As mentioned, the doctrine of the Apostles was embedded in Jewish law, taught by the Savior, love being the guiding principle. When examining the Jubilee implications of the teaching’s of Jesus, it’s not a far reach to say that the disciples initiated a Jubilee. The Jubilee was a socio-economic re-ordering of God’s people. It was a time for joy and celebration of God’s favor. We see this developing through the Book of Acts. There was not a need among them. Leaders were chosen to help with the significant number of daily converts in the church. This brought great excitement to the whole city and soon to the world.

Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:46-47)

This brings me to the point. The Apostle being Jewish Christians would have considered a Jubilee after the Atonement of Christ. When teaching about the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35), the feeding of the fowls of the air (Matthew 6:25-34), the parables
of the lawyer (Matthew 10:25-37), and the parable of the rich young ruler (Matthew 12:16-34), Jesus proclaims the underlining principles of the Jubilee. Seek after God and put into practice compassion and love. Studying the Scriptures with this view will open up passages to a greater understanding.

The Acts of the Apostles is the beginning of the development of the church it lays its foundation. The dispensation of the Law (covenants) needed to be set aside (Romans chapters 9-10) in order for the favor of the Lord, the time of the Gentiles to begin. The disciples may not have fully understood this yet contending that Jewish law needed to be followed by the Gentiles but at the Jerusalem Council an understanding of God’s work among the Gentiles became evident and the burden of the law was not applied to the Gentiles (Acts 15:1-30). In Paul’s writings Christ’s intention of forming a new community, the Church, became crystal clear. The new community would be the “New Man” (Eph. 2:15, Colossians 3:10-11) of both Jews and Gentiles. So how can this understanding help us in our generation?

In our generation the Church (people of God) needs to focus our preaching on the Cross, the atoning work of Christ. The Christian culture has forgotten or has trivialized sin and therefore trivializes the Cross. We have set aside the atoning work of the Cross and

“…become satisfied customers who offer testimonials to how much a personal relationship with Jesus has improved our lives”\textsuperscript{11}, a gospel of self-fulfillment. We focus on our deeds or what our church ministries can provide for you or a therapeutic message of a better life if we follow the golden rule.

\textsuperscript{11} Michael Horton, Christless Christianity, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 53
What needs to be stressed is that we are sinners and fall short of the Glory of God that Christ’s sacrificial love made it possible to approach a Holy God. Anything that we do apart from this fact produces a nauseating form of Christianity. (Revelation 3:14-19). We need to repent and have the Cross as the center of our message. That will enable us to celebrate our rightful jubilee. It’s time for a restructuring, a reformation of the body believers. Professing Christians have assimilated into the world so completely that there appears to be no distinction between them and the people of this age. All the details involved in this restructuring of our lives and churches is another topic, but we need to begin with the Day of Atonement and set in motion the principles of the Jubilee that the Cross of Christ made possible.

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