

Atonement in Early Quakerism: The Work of Christ in the Writings of James Nayler

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Abstract

This paper explores the interpretation of the work of Christ in the writings of James Nayler (1618–60) and considers his contribution to the development of Quaker understandings of salvation, atonement and the cross. The Quaker movement emerged out of Puritanism, within a culture dominated by the Reformed theology of John Calvin. However, influenced by spiritualist tendencies within radical Puritanism, it took a significantly different course. It has been suggested that early Friends paid little attention to the atonement. However, this assumption may only be valid if the doctrine is defined in narrow terms. Contemporary scholarship has highlighted the limitations of traditional theories of atonement and sought to broaden the scope of the discussion. In Nayler's vision, the work of Christ establishes a new humanity, a new covenant, a new people of God, and a new creation, and makes it possible for all people to participate in these realities. He uses a wide range of images and motifs to describe this, and Christ is understood to fulfil at least ten distinct roles in the process. His theology therefore reflects the complexity and fluidity of metaphors to be found in the New Testament and in the various patristic conceptions of redemption, and addresses both the objective and subjective dimensions of atonement.

Keywords

James Nayler, atonement, early Quakers, new covenant, Recapitulation, spiritualism

Introduction: Early Quakers and Atonement in Contemporary Scholarship

There appears to be no scholarly consensus about the early Quaker understanding of atonement and the work of Christ. Indeed, Stephen Angell has suggested that,

due to their neglect of the historical Jesus in favour of a focus on experiential faith in the present, early Friends did not give much attention to the matter.¹ Whilst the universal availability of salvation became a core tenet of their religious vision, in Carole Spencer's words, Quakers 'did not articulate a particular theology of atonement'.² However, such a position is predicated upon a rather narrow view of the work of Christ, that has been influential within Western Christianity, in which the atonement is viewed primarily in terms of the crucifixion and death of Jesus and understood as a forensic *quid pro quo*.³ In the patristic writings, and in the theology of the Eastern Church, the work of Christ includes the whole Incarnation event and its wide-ranging implications for the spiritual state of humanity.⁴

In atonement theology, a key distinction is made between objective theories, which address the way in which the atonement has changed things ontologically, and subjective theories, which pay more attention to the impact of the work of Christ on the individual believer. Given their strongly experiential emphasis, and focus on personal conviction, it has been assumed that early Friends were essentially subjective in orientation and tended to neglect the objective dimensions of the work of Christ. How has this been reflected in contemporary Quaker scholarship. This will be considered in relation to the following four themes:

1. The Historical Jesus or the Universal Christ? Early Friends wrote passionately about their experience of Christ dwelling within them. Dean Freiday has questioned whether their focus on obedience to the inward Light of Christ constituted a denial of Christ's atonement in the flesh.⁵ This was a frequent accusation levelled against them by their Puritan opponents. Arthur Roberts has accepted that the early Quaker position raises significant questions about the exact relationship between the universal Light of Christ, and the historical person of Jesus.⁶ Freiday concludes, however, that a unique aspect of George Fox's teaching was the 'virtually inseparable relationship between what happened in Jerusalem

1 Angell, S. W., 'God, Christ, and the Light', in Angell, S. W. and Dandelion, P. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 161.

2 Spencer, C. D., 'Quakers in Theological Context', in Angell, S. W. and Dandelion, P. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 142.

3 Turner, H. E. W., *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption: a study of the development of doctrine during the first five centuries*, London: A. R. Mowbray & Co. Limited, 1952, p. 99. Turner writes that 'the legal, transactional, and practical bent of much (though not all) Western theology has often been noted'.

4 See for example, Ware, K., *The Orthodox Way*, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979, pp. 73–76.

5 Freiday, D., '“Atonement” in Historical Perspective', *Quaker Religious Thought* 62 (1986), p. 23.

6 Roberts, A. O., 'Early Friends and the Work of Christ', *Quaker Religious Thought* 5 (1961), p. 19.

and what happens in or to the faithful today'.⁷ In addition, Nikki Coffey Tousley has noted that second-generation Quaker writers, such as Robert Barclay and Elizabeth Bathurst, made a direct link between the possibility of salvation and the substitutionary death of Jesus.⁸

2. Imputed Righteousness or Imparted Holiness? The perfectionism of early Quakerism assumed that the indwelling Christ offered people the opportunity to partake in the divine nature. For these Friends, such an opportunity implied much more than the imputation of Christ's righteousness achieved on the cross. It meant that a fundamental dimension of the work of Christ was the transformation of human nature. Quakerism was a holiness tradition.⁹ Both Spencer and Tousley have pointed to the similarities between this position and the theology of the Greek Fathers who believed that deification had been made possible by the work of Christ.¹⁰

3. In This Life or Only After Death? Linked to the issue of holiness were disputes about whether, for the regenerated, the kingdom of God was an already existing reality. To what extent could the full benefits of the atonement be known in this life? Douglas Gwyn has argued that the early Quaker experience of the transforming presence of Christ in Spirit implied a realised eschatology, and involved a genuine participation in the kingdom of God in the here and now.¹¹ Puritan opponents denied this possibility and asserted that Christ would return physically at some point in the future. Until then, the benefits of the work of Christ would only be known after death. This raises a fundamental question about whether the principal purpose of the work of Christ was to transform humanity and the whole of creation, or to offer the hope of a spiritual heaven after death.

4. Propositional Faith or Participative Faith? A key doctrinal foundation of Protestant soteriology was the belief that justification was received by faith alone rather than by any human effort. For Protestants, this sense of faith had a propositional basis—trusting in God's promises made in the Scriptures.¹² While early Friends accepted that salvation was the work of God alone, and not achieved by human agency, their conception of faith was far more participative. Melvin Keiser noted that, for Isaac Penington, true faith was about 'dwelling in and living from the Spirit or eternal Christ within'. This was much more to do with an inward

7 Freiday, "'Atonement' in Historical Perspective', p. 28.

8 Tousley, N. C., 'Sin, Conviction, Purity, and Perfection', in Angell S. W. and Dandelion, P. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 176.

9 Roberts, 'Early Friends and the Work of Christ', pp. 15, 16 and 18.

10 Spencer, C. D., *Holiness: the soul of Quakerism*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2007, p. 35; Tousley, 'Sin, Conviction, Purity, and Perfection', pp. 172–73.

11 Gwyn, D., 'Quakers, Eschatology and Time', in Angell, S. W. and Dandelion, P. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 210.

12 McGrath, A. E., *Reformation Thought: an introduction*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, p. 121.

participation in Christ than with the imputed benefits of a forensic transaction.¹³ Roberts argued that, for early Friends, the perfection of Christ was received by both faith (propositional) and adoption (participative).¹⁴ While Christ undertakes the foundational work, we can become co-workers with Christ by participation.¹⁵

We have seen that, in contemporary scholarship, while there is no established consensus about how early Friends understood atonement and the work of Christ, there is general agreement about the overall orientation of their position. It is assumed that their approach tended to be more subjective than objective, prioritised the universal Spirit of Christ over the Jesus of History, emphasised holiness over imputed righteousness, focussed on this life more than the afterlife, and worked with a definition of faith that was participative rather than merely propositional. Based on the narrow Western definition of atonement, scholars such as Angell and Spencer have questioned the very existence of a systematic theory of atonement in the theology of early Friends.¹⁶ Others, such as Arthur Roberts and Margaret Benefiel, have suggested that these Friends adopted an eclectic approach to atonement theories and motifs.¹⁷ Roberts seeks to show how the objective work of Christ (understood in terms of satisfaction and forgiveness), and the subjective work of Christ (as sanctification and holiness) were held together. Within Wesleyan theology, which has influenced the Evangelical expression of Quakerism, this was based on a forensic conception of the work of Christ on the cross, and a therapeutic understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit within the believer. Rather than advocating a particular view of atonement, Benefiel has shown how models of atonement reflect different orders of reflection. First order reflection describes the experience using symbol and myth, second order reflection establishes formal theories using the language of logic and reason, and third order reflection seeks to draw people into the actual experience.¹⁸ Benefiel's position allows for an eclectic mix of atonement theories and metaphors, but notes that the adoption of third order reflection was an innovative aspect of early Quaker theology.¹⁹ T. Vail Palmer has made the case for one particular atonement motif. He asserts that early Friends rejected the satisfaction and penal substitution theories of atonement (the Latin View) and the Reformed doctrine of imputed righteousness. Instead, Palmer suggests that *Christus Victor* (Christ's

13 Keiser, M. R., 'Felt Reality in practical Living and Innovative Thinking: Mary and Isaac Pennington's journey from Puritan anguish to Quaker truth', in Angell, S. W. and Dandelion, P. (eds), *Early Quakers and their Theological Thought, 1647–1723*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 203.

14 Roberts, 'Early Friends and the Work of Christ', p. 18.

15 Freiday, '"Atonement" in Historical Perspective', p. 30.

16 Western Christianity's more narrow preoccupation with the death of Christ has been noted by H. E. W. Turner. See Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption*, p. 105.

17 Roberts, 'Early Friends and the Work of Christ', p. 15.

18 Benefiel, M. J., 'The Doctrine of Atonement', *Quaker Religious Thought* vol. 70 (1988), p. 22.

19 Benefiel, 'The Doctrine of Atonement', pp. 23–25.

victory over the powers of evil) was the predominant motif within the writings of early Quaker leaders such as George Fox, Edward Burrough and James Nayler. This is exemplified in their frequent use of Lamb's War imagery. He also notes the significance of covenant for these first Friends. Palmer has been influenced by the atonement theology of J. Denny Weaver and R. Larry Shelton.²⁰ He proposes that J. Denny Weaver's theory of narrative Christus Victor, and R. Larry Shelton's argument for the centrality of covenant within atonement theology, could, by reflecting the early Quaker emphasis on Christus Victor and new covenant (the creation of an intimate inward relationship between God and humanity), can assist in the formulation of a contemporary Quaker view.²¹

James Nayler was one of the most important early Quaker leaders, the most prolific writer in the 1650s and, arguably, the most effective theologian of the first generation. As a contribution to the above conversation, this paper considers what Nayler's writings tell us about his theology of the atoning work of Christ. Do his works validate or challenge the assumptions of previous scholarship?

Nayler's Holistic and Integrative Approach

Based on an analysis of his key writings, I will argue that James Nayler's vision of atonement is holistic and integrative in nature, involving the entire Incarnation event, and drawing on the many and varied images and metaphors found in the New Testament writings.²² His conception of the work of Christ is therapeutic-transformational, relational-participative, and mystical-spiritualist in orientation. This perspective seems to have been influenced by a form of radical Puritanism that emerged in early seventeenth-century England. The historian David R. Como has argued that, during this period, radical dissenters began to claim that because of its inherent legalism, Puritan piety had compromised the central Reformation truths of free grace and justification by faith alone. In response, they promised to emancipate believers from the bondage of doubt and anxiety. This offered sustenance to those damaged or estranged by the Puritan path to salvation and, as a result, radical Puritanism 'appropriated, reshaped and transformed the culture of English Puritanism to produce new religious forms'.²³

20 Palmer, T. V., 'Theorising a Quaker View of the Atonement', *Quaker Studies* 16.1(2011), pp. 105–23.

21 See Weaver, J. D., *The Nonviolent Atonement*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001, and Shelton, R. L., *Cross and Covenant: interpreting the atonement for 21st century mission*, Tyrone, GA: Paternoster Press, 2006.

22 Nayler, J. and Kuenning, L. (ed.), *The Works of James Nayler, Volumes 1–4*, Glenside, PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2003–09. All quotations from these works are referenced henceforth thus: *WJN*, volume: page number.

23 See Como, D. R., *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the emergence of an antinomian underground in pre-Civil War England*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004, pp. 137, 219, 432.

Nigel Smith lists three distinguishing features of this type of English radical religion: the rejection of what were regarded as idolatrous external sacraments and ceremonies; the assertion that perfection is possible through the freely given grace of God; and the belief that the gift of the Holy Spirit could fall upon any individual.²⁴ Such a distinctive position, which is visible in Nayler's writings, departs in several important ways from the dominant emphases within Western Christianity, whether Catholic or Reformed.

Nayler's theology of redemption and atonement is primarily transformational and therapeutic in nature, rather than forensic and extrinsic. His emphasis is on the way in which the work of Christ in the flesh has made it possible for the human will to be healed and the human condition transformed by the indwelling of Christ in Spirit. The idea that the death of Christ should be mainly understood in terms of a legal *quid pro quo* transaction is not found within Nayler's writings. For him, salvation and new life in the kingdom of God was something humans could experience within this life. The fall, with all its negative implications for the human condition and the well-being of the creation, was reversed, initially by the work of Christ in the flesh, and then by the spiritual indwelling of Christ within His people. Therefore, unlike the Reformed theology of mainstream Puritanism, which separated justification and sanctification, the indwelling of Christ necessarily led to justification and sanctification as a simultaneous and interconnected process:

I know there are a people who have a desire to heaven more than to holiness; and they, lest they should spoil their carnal delights, have in their brain-imagination conceited a justification without sanctification or mortification, wresting those scriptures which condemn the works of the law, and therewith they would exclude the righteousness of faith also. (WJN3: 118)

This understanding of redemption and atonement is primarily relational and participative in nature, rather than imputed and irresistible. Nayler's emphasis is on the way in which the work of Christ has made it possible for people to fully participate in a new humanity, a new covenant, a new people of God, and a new creation. The idea that the righteousness of Christ is merely imputed to people (i.e. alien to them but treated as if it were theirs through faith alone) is explicitly rejected in Nayler's writings. Although the righteousness received through spiritual regeneration is indeed the righteousness of Christ alone, people share in it through divine indwelling. It is therefore imparted to them and infused into them inwardly and spiritually.

Here we see a conception of redemption and atonement that is essentially mystical and spiritualist in nature, rather than sacramental or *sola fide*. His emphasis is on the need for people to genuinely participate in the work of

²⁴ Smith, N., *Perfection Proclaimed: language and literature in English radical religion, 1640–1669*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 2.

Christ as a real inward and spiritual experience. They must come to know Christ's birth, his life (teachings, healings and miracles), his crucifixion (death of the disobedient life in the first Adam) and his resurrection (new birth into an obedient life in Christ the second Adam) in their own experience. The idea that people benefit from this process mainly through the outward sacraments and liturgies of the church (the Catholic position) or by propositional faith alone (the Reformed/Protestant position) is rejected. It seems that, for him, the entire sacramental system of the Church had to be experienced instead as an inward and spiritual participation in the work of Christ. The outward symbols had no power in themselves; their true substance was the real inward presence of Christ in Spirit.

The Work of Christ: Four Key Achievements

Nayler argues that through his Incarnation, Christ achieved four essential objective changes: He reversed the fall by establishing a new humanity; reconciled the broken relationship between God and humanity by establishing a new covenant; created a new people of God (the new humanity living in the new covenant); and began the renewal of all things by establishing the basis of a new creation.

1. Establishing a New Humanity. This vision shares strong similarities with the patristic doctrine of Recapitulation, originally developed by Irenaeus, drawing on the writings of the apostle Paul. Irenaeus suggested that what humanity had lost in Adam, it had recovered in Christ. Just as Adam was the originator of a race who were disobedient and doomed to death, so Christ inaugurated a new redeemed humanity by incorporation into his mystical body. In this way Christ restored humanity by re-establishing fellowship with God, perfected and deified humanity by restoring God's image and likeness, and achieved victory and liberation by vanquishing the devil and releasing humanity from bondage.²⁵ This is the central theme of one of Nayler's earliest tracts, *A Discovery of the First Wisdom from Below and the Second Wisdom from Above* (1653). Christ has undone the fall and established a new humanity in the image and likeness of God. The disobedience of the first Adam has been reversed by the obedience of Christ, the second Adam. Life in the first Adam is the life of fallen humanity, born of the serpent's seed. Life in Christ is the way of the second Adam, born of the seed of God. Because of the work of Christ, in the new birth, people are incorporated into the life of Christ, the second Adam, and come to share in his divine nature:

there is a first Adam and there is a second Adam; and they who are in the first bear his image; and they who are in the second bear his image; and as is the earthly, such are they that are earthly; and as is the heavenly, such are they that are heavenly. And these are contrary one to the other: the one being from above,

²⁵ Kelly, J. N. D., *Early Christian Doctrines*, London: Adam and Charles Black, 1958, pp. 172–73.

the other being from below; the one the seed of God, the other the seed of the serpent. (WJN1: 46)

But that which is born of the heavenly, is heavenly, spiritual, eternal, and incorruptible; which is the state of the new man, which of God is begotten of the divine nature; and as is his nature, so is his works; and so his delights are spiritual; for as is the man, so are his works; and as is the tree, so is its fruit. And so he that is born of this seed is born of God; and he that is born of God sins not, in whom that seed remains. (WJN3: 97)

2. Establishing a New Covenant. As a result of the Incarnation, a new covenant has been established in which God and humanity can enjoy a direct and intimate relationship in Spirit. In this new covenant, Christ is revealed as the substance of all the outward practices and ceremonies associated with the old covenant. Symbols and images are powerless in themselves. Only Christ, the substance to which they point, has the power to transform the human creature. This new covenant relationship is both established by Christ and exists in Christ. It is the means by which people come to participate in the life of the second Adam, and visibly reveal his character. They become vessels through which Christ acts in the world. In this way, they no longer live, but Christ lives in them (Galatians 2:20):

Is not Christ the ordinance and the end of all ordinances, who is the way, the truth, and the life? Is there any ordinances without him in the gospel? Is not he the sabbath, circumcision, baptism, the supper, &c., are not all these in him? And doth not he minister all these in spirit to everyone that comes to him? and so the shadow is come into the substance, the end of all shadows, which is life indeed; but the figures are not the life, nor can any have the life but who comes to the end of them; for the outward makes nothing perfect, but the inward doth all that come unto it and abide in him. (WJN2: 207–08)

And this we witness to be that covenant and that power by which we are entered into that inheritance which is eternal and are made partakers of the divine nature; which nature is righteous, merciful and just, meek and patient, faithful and diligent to the obedience of the cross, long-suffering, full of love, moderation and temperance, and in all things thereby are transformed into his likeness, so far as we are entered into and abide in this covenant, so that we can truly say, here he is all, and self is nothing. (WJN2: 218)

3. Establishing a New People of God. Christ has established a new people of God. He is ‘the head and governor of his church’ (WJN1: 494–95), leading his people in spirit. They are a new covenant community living in the new humanity of the second Adam. This community finds its unity in Christ, and through its life together reveals God’s intentions for the new creation:

It’s true in the world there be many churches and many heads, gods many, and lords many, many faiths and many opinions; but in Christ Jesus we are called to unity in all these things. (WJN4: 303)

But God hath showed us a more excellent way: the light is come, and therein have we found Christ Jesus, the guide of his people, and the leader of ages, even the Spirit of truth, which leads into all truth, even into all that God requires, the obedience to which is better than sacrifice. (WJN3: 106)

4. Establishing a New Creation. Christ has inaugurated a new creation. The Word of God originally formed the creation and gave it its order, but humans rebelled against this order, and their relationship with the creation became a dysfunctional and destructive one. People return to a right relationship with the rest of creation when they die to life in the first Adam and experience new birth in Christ, the second Adam. Reconciliation with the rest of creation comes by the inward rule of Christ, the Word of God. When this reconciliation is achieved, a new creation is known. Divine guidance reveals and destroys the motivations and impulses that lead to the corruption and destruction of the creation:

So no one can see the life but with the light, which from the life comes, which to the life leads all that come. So this that was in the beginning is given to keep in order all the creation. That is good, but the darkness comprehends it not, though it shine in it; so all that abide in the darkness are destroyed, not discerning the life, to order and govern the creation in the light. (WJN3: 54)

So that this love of God consists of reproofs, judgment and condemnation against all that defiles the creation, and against the creature who yields to that pollution; and this is pure love to the soul, that deals faithfully therewith in declaring its condition. (WJN3: 75)

The Work of Christ: Ten Primary Roles

Within his writings, Nayler describes the work of Christ with reference to at least ten primary roles or functions. In each case, what Christ achieved in His life, death and resurrection in the flesh, He now fulfils within His people in Spirit. He is the eternal divine priest, sacrifice, reconciler, physician, judge, lawgiver, teacher, victor, liberator, and ruler. Each of these roles relates to three key atonement motifs found in the patristic writings: Christ as victim; Christ as illuminator; and Christ as victor.²⁶

Christ as Victim

1. The Priest. Christ is the eternal divine high priest who acts as the mediator between God and humanity. He is the 'one priest, Jesus Christ, the bishop of our souls' (WJN1: 108). In his priestly role, Christ purifies the people of their sins, and re-establishes right relationship between God and his creatures. The functions of outward sacrifices in the past have been superseded. In the new covenant, this is

²⁶ Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption*. In this book, the author looks at patristic positions under four main headings: Christ the illuminator; Christ the victor; Christ the giver of incorruption; and Christ our victim.

no longer the responsibility of a human priesthood, but is a process that takes place within each person, inwardly and spiritually by the Spirit of Christ. The temple of the new covenant is a temple of living stones:

And by talking of his blood at Jerusalem makes his blood of none effect, as he is an everlasting priest, by an everlasting priesthood, not as in one generation, but forever, stands offered up to the Father, with his blood in the everlasting covenant an atonement making, and besprinkling the hearts and consciences of every one of his by the blood of his everlasting covenant, which not being done by faith within, makes that at Jerusalem of none effect as to that person. (WJN3: 249)

2. The Sacrifice. Christ is the eternal divine sacrificial offering. His blood has become a powerful spiritual reality that cleanses people of their sin and re-establishes the broken covenant relationship with God. This offering must be received by every person as an inward and spiritual experience. While Christ's outward sacrifice in the past made this possible, on its own this is insufficient. Those who rely only on what Christ did in the flesh in first-century Jerusalem, cannot benefit from His saving power. They must participate in His passion themselves. The earthly human wisdom of the first birth must be crucified so that divine wisdom can be received in its place. 'Your wisdom that you so much boast on must be crucified and die, and a new wisdom must be given you from above' (WJN1: 70–71). Understood in this way, the cross represents a sacrificial surrendering of the human will to the will of God:

And know thou that the blood of Christ is not words nor imaginations, of what thou never see before thou was born, but a living substance, which is to be known, with its effect, to every particular saint in every generation, and such who say they are saved by the blood of Christ before they were, but now are found in their sins, are such as deny the blood of Christ, and to them they make it of none effect. (WJN3: 244)

3. The Reconciler. Christ is the eternal divine reconciler. He is the 'word of reconciliation, which unites God and the creature in Spirit' (WJN3: 62–63). This reconciliation occurs when Christ is made manifest within the human body, and when people follow His guidance and teaching within their hearts. He leads His people out of all the divisions and conflicts of the world and into a reconciled relationship with God:

Nay, this is not the way of settlement or lasting peace: that, you must have in returning and making peace with the Spirit of Jesus; you must kiss the Son and so make peace, for this hath been seen concerning you of these nations, that if you own not the light of Christ in Spirit and truth, that he may lead you out of these many things which are not of God, and reconcile you to God in Spirit and truth, there to worship him alone who is a Spirit. (WJN4: 312)

4. The Physician. Christ is the eternal divine physician whose work within people heals them of the disease of sin. He is 'the Sun of Righteousness, whose arising is with healing in his wings' (WJN3: 127–28). Christ must be allowed to

do His healing work within people's hearts. This is the only effective remedy, and the only source of spiritual well-being:

remember what we in love to your souls have warned you of, which we dearly desire may never come upon you to the full, but that that eye may be minded in you, which would lead you out of the world, to see the rising of the Son of righteousness, where the honest in heart shall meet in Spirit, and find healing. (WJN4: 182)

Christ as Illuminator

5. The Teacher. Christ is the eternal divine teacher. When He is born within people, He fulfils the new covenant promise that God will teach His people Himself (Jeremiah 31:31–34). Christ crucifies everything that separates people from divine wisdom, and 'by him (they) come to have the Father revealed also, and so come to the knowledge of God' (WJN2: 228):

And here is your true teacher, whereby all shall be taught of God, as saith the Scripture; and minding this light, it will show you a cross to be daily taken up, whereby all the unruly nature must be crucified. (WJN1: 43)

6. The Judge. Christ is the eternal divine judge. He examines, diagnoses and pronounces judgment on the spiritual condition of those in whom He dwells. His light reveals what is hidden, and all that stands between the old life in Adam and the new life in Christ is made visible so that it can be eradicated. God's people, by living in the new birth, come to share in this ministry of judgment:

True judgment (as it is known to men) is a gift from the Spirit of God, set in the heart of everyone who dwells in the light of Christ, which judgment passes upon all that is in the creature, contrary to the life of God. (WJN3: 77)

Therefore did all the saints love judgment; for it is the ministration of Christ, ministered out upon all that's against Christ, and that which is against Christ is against the soul: so this judgment must begin at the house of God. (WJN3: 78)

7. The Lawgiver. Christ is the eternal divine lawgiver. In the new covenant, he writes the law in the human heart and people come to 'know him for their judge and lawgiver' (WJN3: 126). Rather than being a limited external constraint on human conduct, this law is a powerful tool of transformation, revealing and condemning all sin so that it can be eradicated:

But you shall have your laws from the lawgiver Christ Jesus, and your judgment from the Father of lights, whose ministers then you are, to whose sword that of God in every conscience shall answer, which is written in every heart. (WJN4: 108)

Christ the Victor

8. The Victor. Christ is the eternal divine victor. When Christ (the seed of the woman) is born within people, they come to share in His victory over the powers of evil initially achieved in His life, death and resurrection in the flesh. In this

way, people are cleansed of sin and lifted out of spiritual death, into a new life in communion with God. Again, this is experienced as an inward and spiritual participation in the Incarnation event. This is the Lamb's War, a spiritual struggle to liberate people from the power of sin and evil. Those who follow the Lamb are transformed into His likeness and join Him in the final defeat of evil, and the establishment of the kingdom of God and a restored creation:

And all who remain in this seed, and it in them, this hath the promise and power that puts off the old man with his deeds, lusts, and affections; and so the body of sin being put off through the body of Christ, the redemption is witnessed; and as the creature passeth from the old to the new, so they pass from the death to the life; for the life is in the new, and so the victory is received in the new, over sin, the grave, and hell. (WJN3: 97–98)

for the faith of Christ is a shield, and gives victory over uncleanness, sin and evil; but the devil's faith lets in, and believes it must be so: for had not the devil first brought man to believe him rather than God, he could not have polluted what God had perfected. And the same way he takes to keep up his work, by which at first he wrought it. (WJN3: 81)

9. The Liberator. Christ is the eternal divine liberator who has purchased freedom for His people. By participating in Christ's death and resurrection as an inward and spiritual experience, people share in His redemptive work. In this way they are ransomed, 'set free from the service of sin and Satan' (WJN 3: 116) and come to enjoy the freedom and joy of union with God:

for you shall feel and see your Redeemer in the midst of you, and with his body shall you rise and live, and you shall not be ransomed with silver or gold, from the hand of the oppressor, but by the precious blood of Christ. (WJN4: 141)

And this ever mind: that whatever freedom you obtain through the sufferings and patience of Christ in Spirit, you part not with it to please the flesh, but hold it as your everlasting possession purchased for you, not with corruptible things; so that which is dearly purchased, let not lightly go. (WJN4: 160)

10. The Ruler. Christ is the eternal divine ruler. He reigns over the new creation and the new humanity within the new covenant. The rule of Christ within the human heart defeats evil and leads to peace and righteousness. By restoring the right relationship between God and humanity, people come to be ruled by God, rather than by the devil:

And thus the saints know the Son with his light, his power and dominion over all things in heaven and in earth, who rules in righteousness in the hearts of his people, trampling down Satan under their feet. (WJN3: 128)

The end of his war is ... to restore all things, and make all things new, as they were in the beginning, that God alone may rule in his own work. (WJN4: 2)

The Objective and Subjective Dimensions of Atonement

Nayler adopted an eclectic approach to the use of atonement motifs and balanced the objective and the subjective dimensions of the work of Christ. The following passage offers important insights into the shape of his atonement theology. First, Nayler states that it was the actions and achievements of Christ in his Incarnation that made the true and living faith available to him. Secondly, he asserts that it was the outward testimony of Scripture that helped him begin to understand what Christ had achieved and prompted his faith in God's promises. Thirdly, he makes clear that this limited outward knowledge led him to a more powerful living faith experienced as a real inward encounter with Christ in Spirit. Finally, he draws on several traditional atonement motifs to describe the work of Christ. These include sacrifice (a priestly offering for sin), Christus Victor (a victory over sin, evil and death) and Theosis (a participation in the divine character):

And though the foundation of this faith or beginning of it was, that I did really believe in that which Christ did and suffered at Jerusalem, and that there in that vessel he bare the sins of the world, and satisfied the wrath of God for sins past, and overcame death, hell and the grave, and made way for the seed to arise in all through the whole world who would believe in his light ... And much more might be said of him there finished, all which I did believe according to Scripture, which was as an opening of me to receive him from heaven in the same Spirit and power. (WJN4: 73)

Some thirty years later, the theological issues addressed by Nayler in this passage were to become key points of dispute within the 'Keithian Controversy'.²⁷

The Residues of Reformed Puritanism

Some scholars claim to perceive the presence of residues of Calvinist Puritanism within Nayler's theology.²⁸ We will consider three examples of this that relate directly to atonement and salvation: forensic justification; predestined election; and limited atonement.

1. Forensic Justification. In the following passage taken from *A Discovery of the Man of Sin* (1654), the language used might point to a satisfaction or penal substitution theory of atonement. The implication being that, in his passion, Christ received the divine punishment required for the offence of human sin, on our behalf, as a forensic transaction:

That we are 'justified freely by his grace' we own; and that God hath set him forth to be a 'propitiation'; that 'he was wounded for our transgressions,' and that

²⁷ See Ward, M., *The Christian Quaker: George Keith and the Keithian controversy*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2019.

²⁸ See for example, Endy, M. B., *William Penn and Early Quakerism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973, pp. 69–70.

'he laid on him the iniquities of us all,' and his sufferings we own: and we witness what he did, he doth still in us, and bears and supports us, and so 'the remainders of the sufferings of Christ that are yet behind' are by him 'fulfilled in us': and by his mighty working in us is the man of sin cast out. (WJN1: 504)

However, such imagery is also consistent with the Christus Victor and Recapitulation models of atonement. Indeed, Nayler makes it clear that the outward crucifixion was not a one-off forensic event. It was an action that must continue to be 'fulfilled in us'. He also points out that the purpose of Christ's sufferings was to cast out the man of sin from within people, rather than to pay a legal penalty for sin. In the following passage taken from *What the Possession of the Living Faith Is* (1659), Nayler implies that the wrath of God is experienced as an existential state of alienation from God, leading to a bondage of the will, helplessness and spiritual death:

And this great redemption I found in Christ Jesus ... the setting of me free from the wrath of God for all my sins of ignorance past, which else had laid upon me as a weight or chain, binding me that I could not have walked the way of his light, &c. (WJN4: 90)

Although 'satisfaction' has often been understood as the payment of a debt, it can also mean 'a quittance given to the law of death applied against the sinner'.²⁹ This indicates a release from debt, rather than a payment. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that, in this case, his primary emphasis is on the work of Christ as a victory over evil, a liberation of people from spiritual death, and the establishment of a new humanity free of sin.

2. Predestined Election. The next, taken from *Love to the Lost* (1656), refers to a divinely preordained election and reprobation as 'an eternal and unalterable decree'. On the face of it, this sounds very much like mainstream Calvinist doctrine:

But none knows the purpose of God, but who comes to the beginning, for in the beginning was the election and reprobation established by an eternal decree unalterable in the two seeds, that after the flesh, and that after the Spirit, and he that can judge of these two, he knows the two vessels, ordained to honor and dishonor; and as everyone is found in these, so is God's purpose touching them. (WJN3: 94)

However, a little later in the same tract, Nayler makes clear that the preordained election is to be found in Christ. Since the Holy Spirit has been poured upon all flesh, everyone has the seed of the election within them. The election is obtained when people 'believe in his light', which has the power to cleanse them of sin. Hence, salvation is available to all, but requires a response of faith:

Now in Christ Jesus is the election, and the elect seed in whom the election is obtained, and in whom alone it is established; and in the midst of all the dishonor

29 Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption*, p. 107.

his light is tendered to lead out of the dishonor, the curse, and the fall; and whatsoever he be that will believe in his light, without respect of persons, he leads out of the world and to the cleansing and purging of the body, soul and mind. (WJN3: 94)

For Nayler, those whom he felt were not yet living in the new humanity and covenant, such as his Calvinist opponents, could not participate in this election, and were still subject to the outward types and shadows of the old covenant.

3. Limited Atonement. Another passage from *Love to the Lost* (1656) appears to warn people that God limits the offer of salvation and may withdraw it if a person fails to respond. This could point to the Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement:

be not hasty in judging that which yet thou knowest not, nor kick against that which comes contrary to thy will, lest thou put far from thee in thy will, that which therewith thou canst not call again, and the day of thy visitation pass over unawares, and in the evil day thou be made to cry out, 'How have I hated instruction, and resisted the day of healing!' (WJN3: 48)

The significance of this warning, however, may reflect the perceived urgency of the situation. Apocalyptic expectations were high during the 1650s and it is likely that Nayler believed that the day of judgement and the full establishment of the kingdom of God were imminent. In such circumstances, the tone of his message is understandable. This is reflected in the following passage from *The Power and the Glory of the Lord Shining Out of the North* (1653):

for this is the day of your visitation if you will own it; the day of salvation from all sin and unrighteousness, the day wherein all the children of the Lord shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be their peace, in righteousness shall they be established, and they shall be far from oppression. (WJN: 194)

This analysis suggests that, while Nayler's theology was formed within a Puritan context and he often used language with Calvinist connotations, the meaning of these words was radically altered. This may reflect a process of reinterpretation common among radical Puritans whose sectarian position, although rooted in Reformed ideas, was informed by mysticism, spiritualism, perfectionism and apocalypticism. Como has argued that such radicalism owed its existence to Puritanism, and 'subsisted in a symbiotic, or perhaps more appropriately, parasitic relationship' to it.³⁰

Conclusion

We have seen that the early Quaker conception of atonement and salvation revealed in the writings of James Nayler differs significantly from the mainstream positions associated with both Catholicism and Protestantism. In the Catholic tradition, as a result of the Incarnation, people are saved by incorporation into the

30 Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, p. 137.

mystical body of Christ. This is achieved primarily through participation in the liturgies and sacraments of the Church (infused righteousness) and by good works. In Reformed Protestantism, salvation is understood to be by faith alone in what Christ achieved in his life, death and resurrection. By this faith, people benefit from Christ's imputed righteousness and are deemed justified by God. They then receive the Holy Spirit, which may sanctify them over time. However, in Nayler's understanding, people are saved by the indwelling of the mystical body of Christ. This is made possible by the Incarnation but must be experienced within each person through a process of spiritual death and rebirth accomplished by the Holy Spirit. Hence, in this early Quaker position, the righteousness of Christ is both infused and imparted into the believer.

One of the strengths of Nayler's therapeutic-transformational, relational-participative and mystical-spiritualist soteriology is that, while it tends to reject the forensic, imputed, sacramental and sola fide themes dominant within Western Christianity, it is able to incorporate the much wider range of metaphors and motifs used in the New Testament and by the early church to make sense of the work of Christ. This includes the themes of sacrifice, victory, ransom, liberation, reconciliation, sovereignty, judgment, illumination and healing, all held together within an overarching framework of Recapitulation, new covenant, and Theosis. This broadened perspective on atonement is becoming increasingly influential within modern scholarship and, as J. N. D. Kelly has argued, the idea of Recapitulation was central to the theology of the early church:

Running through almost all the patristic attempts to explain the redemption there is one grand theme which, we suggest, provides the clue to the fathers' understanding of the work of Christ. This is none other than the ancient idea of Recapitulation which Irenaeus derived from St. Paul, and which envisages Christ as the representative of the entire race.³¹

In his recent book, *The Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant*, Michael J. Gorman offers a vision of a new covenant model of atonement that shares several common emphases with Nayler's conception of the work of Christ.³² Both propose that the ultimate purpose of Jesus' death was to give birth to a new covenant of peace, to create a new community of spirit-filled disciples, and to establish a people who are faithful to God and love their neighbours through participation in the death of Jesus. Both argue that the life of this new covenant community should be expressed in the practices of cruciform faith (being faithful to God even to the point of suffering and death), cruciform love (siding with the weak and rejecting domination in favour of service), and cruciform hope (living peaceably and making peace). Finally, both believe that this new way has become possible as a result of Jesus' resurrection and the gift

³¹ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 376.

³² Gorman, M. J., *The Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant: the (not-so) new model of the atonement*, Cambridge: James Clarke, 2014.

of the Holy Spirit.³³ Gorman has argued that there are several key limitations associated with traditional Western models of atonement. He suggests that they tend to be isolationist and sectarian (claiming to tell the whole story and excluding the insights of other models); atomistic and non-integrative (standing apart from wider theological themes such as ecclesiology and pneumatology); individualistic (having an almost exclusive focus on individual salvation); and under-achieving (focussing only on the penultimate purpose of Jesus' death and ignoring the ultimate purpose).³⁴ He asserts that the New Testament is far more interested in what Jesus' death does for humanity than the mechanics of how it does it.³⁵ Gorman's work is part of a growing body of contemporary scholarship that is focussed on exploring nonviolent conceptions of atonement. It seeks to go beyond a narrow focus on the death of Jesus by giving attention to the whole Incarnation, and draws inspiration from patristic and Eastern Orthodox sources.³⁶ Nayler's holistic and integrative approach to the work of Christ is consistent with this approach and successfully avoids the limitations Gorman highlights. While this conception of atonement seems to validate the general view of contemporary scholars about the overall orientation of the early Quaker position, it does not support the argument that any one motif was dominant. A wide range of atonement metaphors are held together within an overarching framework provided by the doctrines of Recapitulation and Theosis. This is a coherent and sophisticated understanding of the work of Christ that is far more systematic and orthodox than previous scholarship has been willing to acknowledge.³⁷ It suggests that James Nayler was indeed the most gifted theologian of the earliest Quaker movement and that his work retains a real relevance and value today.

What has primarily distinguished the Quaker position from that of other Christian groups is the way in which Friends have understood the new covenant in mystical and spiritualist terms. It is ironic that, given its roots within a Reformed Puritan context, early Quaker soteriology, at times, looks more like an internalised and spiritualised form of Catholicism than an expression of mainstream Protestantism. James Nayler's vision of atonement and the work of Christ reflects the mystical, spiritualist, perfectionist, endonomian, and

33 Gorman, *The Death of the Messiah*, p. 210.

34 Gorman, *The Death of the Messiah*, pp. 19–20.

35 Gorman, *The Death of the Messiah*, p. 204.

36 See for example, Flood, D., *Healing the Gospel: a radical vision for grace, justice, and the cross*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012; Jersak, B. and Hardin, M. (eds), *Stricken by God: nonviolent identification and the victory of Christ*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007; Jersak, B., *A More Christlike God: a more beautiful gospel*, Pasadena, CA: Plain Truth Ministries, 2015; and Kruger, C. B., *Jesus and the Undoing of Adam*, Jackson, MS: Perichoresis Press, 2003.

37 The definition of orthodoxy used here is based on the breadth and depth of Christian doctrine as it has been revealed across history, rather than on what was regarded as acceptable within seventeenth-century English Reformed theology.

apocalyptic characteristics of the radical Puritan underground that formed the religious milieu within which the early Quaker movement emerged.³⁸ In terms of orthodox Christian doctrine, faith and practice, and the status of Quakerism within the Church catholic, it is the radical spiritualism of Nayler and early Friends that remains the primary point of divergence and dispute.

Author Details

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³⁸ Quakers and other Radical Puritans were frequently denounced as 'antinomian'. This word is problematic since it suggests that they rejected the need for any moral or ethical standards. I am therefore proposing a new word 'endonomian', which points to the inward and spiritual fulfilment of God's law in the new covenant as it is described in Jeremiah 31:33/Hebrews 8:10.