

**TRANSFORMING  
ATONEMENT: A Political  
Theology of the Cross  
by Theodore W. Jennings  
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Theodore Jennings Jr., is professor of Biblical and Constructive Theology at Chicago Theological Seminary. In this book he sets out to recover the saving significance of Jesus' cross for the present. He believes it has become a source of contention for Protestant Christians because it is understood through inherited theories of atonement that depend upon outdated concepts of sacrifice. The challenge today is to understand Jesus' cross in ways that do not support anti-Judaism (10-12) or sanction abuse (12-14). The key to this is attending to how Jesus' cross resulted from his public ministry, and then relating the dynamics of prophetic resistance it represents to the present. The cross was a public event and its meaning for contemporary public arenas must be expressed.

Jennings maintains that Jesus' cross was first that of a prophet who spoke out against the oppressive domination of the Roman Empire. It de-legitimized the peace of the Roman Empire by exposing the violence on which it rested (40). It

calls for a continuing non-violent resistance to the forces of Empire, such as modeled by Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. (57).

He says that Jesus' cross is also a sign of reconciliation. In the early church, it abolished divisions between peoples like that between Jew and Greek (63). The handing over of Jesus to the Gentiles (Romans) to be crucified marks the end of separation between those included in God's covenant and those excluded. All now belong to God (70). The cross de-legitimizes all forms of separation and exclusion. Jesus was placed amongst the excluded in order that through their inclusion, a fully inclusive new humanity may come into being. Jennings continues to affirm the election of Israel. But if the cross extends the grace of God to all nations, what does the continuing election of Israel mean? Jennings does not dwell on this.

Jennings next draws connections between Jesus' table fellowship with sinners and his cross. He finds that Jesus consistently sided with those accused of personal immorality, against their accusers, without demanding that the accused repent and change their behaviour. Jesus presented them with the possibility of a new life, but his acceptance was not dependent on their following this. Only when it was a case of

social ethics, justice and mercy, did a change in the sinners behaviour become important (93). Jesus' cross results from his "siding with the accused against the accuser" (98). Where this leads in terms of personal morality is unclear.

Jennings moves next to the relation of Jesus' cross and suffering. When Jesus called people to take up their cross, he was calling them to put their lives on the line in confronting social injustice (106). The aim of this is the deliverance of victims and their oppressors from inhuman relations which dehumanize both. He does a good job of distinguishing what suffering is to be accepted, what is to be opposed, and the goal of this, the overcoming of injustice (108-110). He emphasizes the physical aspects of salvation and how this mandates care for the bodies of all and for the earth (123).

On the question of how Jesus' cross reconciles us to God, Jennings undertakes a critique of forms of idolatry in which God appears as the reverse of what previous chapters have argued Jesus reveals God to be. This forms a transition to what Christian communities and life should look like in light of Jesus' cross.

Surveying Paul's letters, Jennings finds him arguing that the dynamics of resistance to oppression, openness to diversity and care for others that the cross represents must shape church life (170). Jesus' cross calls for a renunciation of competitiveness and self-preoccupation in favour of openness and vulnerability to others (196). It reveals a God who takes away human sin by confronting and suffering human violence (215-216).

In conclusion, Jennings reviews Gustav Aulén's three types of atonement and finds that all evade the historical reality of Jesus' cross and so fail to see that the cross is about God's "claim and call for justice" (223). It represents the fundamental conflict between God and injustice. However, other theologians who share his passion utilize versions of these types to provide theological undergirding for struggles for social justice. Jennings has written an accessible, provocative and at times insightful study of the cross. But his sweeping denunciations of traditional models of the atonement sometimes throw the baby out with the bath water.

— Don Schweitzer