

Study Questions for BLT 53, no. 3 (summer 2008)

Atonement, Ethics, Society, and Violence

by Thomas Finger

1. How would you define sin? How would you describe atonement? How do people atone for sin?
2. Finger argues that a central purpose of our faith is to search for “at-one-ness” with God. How have you, in your life, become at one with God? Can you point to a moment or to someone who helped you see the way?
3. Some Christians believe that God sent Jesus into the world for exactly this purpose, to take away the sins of the world. Finger believes that Jesus was sent with a different mission. How would you describe that mission? What do you believe is Jesus’ role?
4. Finger asks his own question. If the death of Jesus is the key action in the New Testament, why do the Gospels give so much attention to the teachings of Jesus?
5. Give examples from your own experience of the ways in which the teachings of Jesus have brought you to a better understanding of God and a closer relationship with God.
6. If Jesus pays the price of our sin with his life, what does he accomplish in the resurrection?
7. What part do the *teachings* of Jesus, in addition to his death, play in “at-one-ment”?
8. If faith is not about rewards for right living or punishment for wrong choices, what is it about?
9. “In Jesus’ day, people expected the Messiah to defeat God’s enemies and establish God’s kingdom militarily.” We sometimes expect the Messiah to do the same—defeat sin and bring in the kingdom so we don’t have to. Instead of sitting on the sidelines, how can Christians actually participate in defeating sin?
10. “If he [Jesus] had exercised far greater powers than any of us possess, he hardly would have accomplished the *human* task.” When Christians talk about modeling their lives after Jesus, what do they hope to accomplish? To what extent can we usher in justice, faithfulness, and at-one-ness? To what extent is this imitation of Jesus a personal, spiritual accomplishment for each one of us? To what extent is it a community accomplishment that we do together?
11. Finger tries to follow the logic of substitutionary atonement. If Jesus’ death is crucial to the salvation of the world, are the authorities who killed Jesus actually agents of God who get this accomplished? How does the resurrection change that reality?
12. In your view, is violence (as in the death of Jesus) sometimes necessary to destroy evil and bring in the kingdom? Why or why not?