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ARTICLE

How divine solidarity liberates

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Abstract

Many people have argued that God experiences the suffering of the oppressed, but does divine solidarity liberate? This article answers this question with incarnation-focused sketches of the doctrines of salvation, atonement and mission: God gives life and communion with God and neighbour (salvation) by living and communing with us in Jesus Christ (atonement); and God continues to give life and restore communion as the Spirit sent by the Father joins us to God and each other in Jesus Christ (mission). These doctrines are made explicitly liberationist by emphasising the sociopolitical dimensions and imperatives of life and communion with God and neighbour.

Keywords: atonement; divine passibility; divine solidarity; liberation; mission

Writing from his prison cell, Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously penned the powerful words, 'only the suffering God can help'.[1] This terse statement foreshadowed a major shift in mid-twentieth-century theology, particularly in response to the world's reckoning with centuries of European violence on the continent and in its former colonies. A generation after Bonhoeffer, Jürgen Moltmann took Bonhoeffer's statement in one of the directions he seems to have intended, toward a criticism of the notion of divine impassibility: 'a God who cannot suffer', says Moltmann, 'is poorer than any man. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved … [T]he one who cannot suffer cannot love either.'[2] Many theologians have followed Moltmann in rejecting divine impassibility, especially when construed as God's being 'too exalted to act so as to himself descend in utter humiliation in order to save us in such a way that what he did really affected him'.[3] Divine impassibility has been questioned so strongly that Michael Ward can even call theopaschitism 'the new orthodoxy'.[4]

[1]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. Reginald Fuller (New York: Touchstone, 1997), p. 361.

[2]Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 222.

[3]Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p. 227.

[4]Michael Ward, 'Theopaschitism: Is Jesus Christ Able or Unable to Suffer in his Divine Nature?', in Ben Quash and Michael Ward (eds), *Heresies and How to Avoid Them: Why it Matters What Christians Believe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 61. See also David Bentley Hart, 'No Shadow of Turning: On Divine Impassibility', *Pro Ecclesia* 11/2 (2002), pp. 184–206; and J. Warren Smith, 'Suffering Impassibly: Christ's Passion in Cyril of Alexandria's Christology', *Pro Ecclesia* 11/4 (2002), pp. 463–83.

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While many commentators on this passage from Bonhoeffer focus on the question *whether* God suffers, this article will focus on the help God's suffering brings and *how* God brings that help. To be sure, some people will question whether the suffering of God does in fact help. More traditional theologians might say there is nothing saving about divine suffering since there is no such thing as divine suffering in the first place,[5] while others, including some feminist, womanist and *mujerista* theologians, worry about seeing something redemptive in the violent cross, which could be construed as an ethical model to support Black women's surrogacy, self-negation in the face of oppression or even divine child abuse, the Father taking out his wrath on the Son for the sake of others.[6] Thus, womanist theologian Delores S. Williams, for example, sees 'nothing of God in the blood of the cross'.[7]

Against both views, this article assumes that God suffers on the cross and that this suffering is in some sense salvific. The question is how this divine suffering – this solidarity of God with suffering humanity – saves. How does solidarity liberate? Moltmann provides an entry point for these reflections: 'God in Auschwitz and Auschwitz in the crucified God – that is the basis for a real hope which both embraces and overcomes the world, and the ground for a love which is stronger than death and can sustain death.'[8] This rhetorically powerful account of divine solidarity in the depths of human suffering is similar to discussions of how the oppressed benefit from the knowledge that God suffered a fate like theirs. In these discussions, the emphasis typically falls on the epistemic benefits accruing to the poor. When the poor look upon the cross, they see someone who is like them in all things, including their oppression: God has identified with *them* in a way that affirms their humanity in the face of dehumanisation. God's identification with 'the vanquished', in the words of Orlando O. Espín, can give them a sense of self-worth they should never have been denied.[9] James Cone says that Jesus 'bestowed upon [Black slaves] a definition of humanity that could not be destroyed by the whip and the pistol'.[10]

It is a tremendous achievement to affirm not only that the vanquished and enslaved bear the image of God, but that the image of the invisible God suffered horrific violence

[5]For a traditional account of impassibility, see Richard E. Creel, *Divine Impassibility: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (New York: CUP, 1986). Creel defines impassibility as the inability to 'be affected by an outside force' and suggests that there are four ways in which God can be said to be impassible: in nature, will, knowledge and feelings. Strict impassibilists say not only that God's *nature* as love, God's *will* to rescue humanity and God's *knowledge* cannot be affected from outside, for example by acts of human faithfulness (prayer) or unfaithfulness (the Holocaust). They will also say, 'God's feelings … cannot be affected by an outside force' (p. 11).

[6]Nancy Pineda-Madrid summarises this view: 'a distorted Anselmian theology of the cross has been used to prolong, if not tacitly condone, situations of domestic violence and many other forms of violence – all under the banner of "carrying one's cross"'. Nancy Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), p. 86.

[7]Delores S. Williams, 'Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption', in Marit Trelstad (ed.), *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), p. 32. While Williams provides valuable critical insight into the problem of the cross for moral (mal-)formation *and* for helping us see the whole life of Jesus as saving, her reduction of salvation to little more than inspiring knowledge seems overly restrictive in the face of the majority Christian view that there is indeed something salvific about the cross.

[8]Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 278.

[9]Orlando O. Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), pp. 11–31.

[10]James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), p. 31.

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like what they suffer. The oppressed may derive a sense of meaning and purpose, perhaps even the comfort they need to survive, from assertions of human dignity and divine identification with them in their plight. Yet it is not clear how this knowledge of the presence of 'God in Auschwitz and Auschwitz in the crucified God' liberates and gives hope, for the suffering of the Son of God on the cross does not necessarily imply either the overcoming of oppression or Jesus' continual liberating presence with the oppressed. We are left wondering how exactly divine solidarity liberates: what is the *content* of this liberation, and what is its *mechanism*?

This article answers these questions by offering incarnation-focused sketches of the doctrines of salvation, atonement and mission. I argue that salvation is God's gift of life and communion with God and neighbour; then I suggest that the mechanism by which God saves us is precisely God's living and communing with us in the incarnate Word. I follow Cone's assertion that in Jesus Christ 'God becomes oppressed humanity', to argue that it is God's solidarity with oppressed humanity that makes them be 'at-one' with God.[11] Finally, I argue that God continues to be in life-giving, communion-restoring solidarity with the vulnerable because God's mission into the world, enacted in the Father's sending (Latin: *missio*) of the Son and Spirit, continues today.[12] The pattern of God's active presence in the history of Jesus Christ shows us how God promises to be actively present today through the Holy Spirit. These doctrines are made explicitly liberationist by emphasising the inherently sociopolitical dimensions and imperatives of life and communion with God and neighbour, both in Jesus' day and in our own.

This article thus enriches our reflections on salvation by drawing three streams of thought into extensive conversation with each other. The first stream is the classical, incarnation-focused account of the atonement, as represented in our day by theologians Thomas F. Torrance and Kathryn Tanner.[13] Their work provides the basic dogmatic structure for this article, but my work differs from theirs in that I follow liberation theologians like James H. Cone and Virgilio Elizondo in emphasising the social location Jesus occupies. Thus, liberationists supplement the more classical stream of thought represented by Torrance and Tanner, while Torrance and Tanner clarify some of the dogmatic moves made by liberationists, who do not tell us how God's incarnate solidarity liberates. Finally, missional theology enters the conversation to answer the question of how God *continues* to liberate today.[14]

The help God's suffering brings: salvation as communion

I begin with Gustavo Gutiérrez, whose accounts of sin and salvation set the stage for what follows. For Gutiérrez, sin is not only the breaking of laws or the failure to give

[11]James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), p. 121.

[12]I have learned to speak of God's 'mission *into*' (rather than 'in') the world from John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity,* Missio Dei, *Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010).

[13]For more on this stream in the doctrine of atonement, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Atonement', in Kelly M. Kapic and Bruce L. McCormack (eds), *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), pp. 181–4.

[14]While my work is indebted to Flett (see n. 12 above) and other US authors considered 'missional theologians' (such as Darrell L. Guder), José Míguez Bonino features prominently in my missiological reflections below. On missional theology, see Craig Ott (ed.), *The Mission of the Church: Five Views in Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016).

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God what God is due, but also 'a social, historical fact, the absence of fellowship and love in relationships among persons, the breach of friendship with God and with other persons'.[15] Gutiérrez then describes salvation in this way: 'Christ introduces us by the gift of his Spirit into communion with God and with all human beings … [I]t is because he introduces us into this communion, into a continuous search for its fullness, that he conquers sin – which is the negation of love – and all its consequences.'[16] This straightforward definition of sin as the negation of communion/love and salvation as the realization of communion may not seem as amenable to liberation theology as the dramatic, *Christus Victor* theory of the atonement popularised by Gustaf Aulén,[17] which Cone cited with some approval as early as 1975.[18] Yet for Gutiérrez, sin is social, historical, political, economic and so forth, 'evident in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of humans by humans, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races, and social classes'; and the restored fellowship God grants us is also embodied in particular social, historical, political and economic circumstances: 'In Christ and through the Spirit, persons are becoming one in the very heart of history'.[19] This took place in the early church as Jews and gentiles were called to peaceable unity in Christ (Eph 2:11–21) and as believers were called to share their resources across class and ethnic lines (Rom 15:26–8; 1 Cor 11:17–22). Just as sin – the breach of friendship with God and others – is embodied in structures, so the conquering of sin will be embodied in such structures.

This points to the second way Gutiérrez's account of salvation is liberating: his description of the relationship between salvation and the struggle for justice. Gutiérrez does not believe we bring about the kingdom in its fullness and apart from God's help,[20] but he does believe that, in creating a just and peaceful society, God and human beings cooperate in causing the kingdom to progress in the world: 'to struggle against misery and exploitation and to build a just society is already to be part of the saving action'.[21] For Gutiérrez, God and human beings cooperate to realize salvation in history because salvation – again – is communion with God and neighbour, a communion that must be made authentic by attending to concrete, material divisions.

While we might question Gutiérrez's claim that any work for justice 'is a salvific work' inasmuch as it is 'an attempt to vanquish selfishness, the negation of love', we can agree that Christian faithfulness must be sociopolitical.[22] Social structures affect the quality of fellowship, so we must work to improve those structures if we are to improve our fellowship. To be sure, God's communion-restoring work precedes, enables and exceeds our own work. But our work to these ends is a way of responding to and experiencing here and now, if only partially, the communion God gives us. People who

[15]Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 103.

[16]Ibid. Communion is cosmic as well, as Paul suggests in Rom 8:19–23. For this reminder, as for so much else, I am indebted to Tiffany Ashworth.

[17]Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

[18]Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 212. Cone also noted that Aulén's model needed to be 'radicalized politically' to highlight the political dimensions of Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection.

[19]Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, p. 91.

[20]For Gutiérrez's denial of 'historical immanentism', see *Theology of Liberation*, p. xxxix. God establishes the kingdom 'gratuitously'. See also p. 99: 'the growth of the Kingdom goes beyond temporal progress'.

[21]Ibid., p. 91.

[22]Ibid., pp. 103–4.

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want to be 'at one' with God and others must work toward oneness among human beings, a oneness that 'take[s] into account the deep causes of present conditions [of unjust division] and the real prerequisites for building a just society'.[23] Communion with God and neighbour is both gift and task, utterly gratuitous and 'always in the process of becoming'.[24]

How God's suffering helps: incarnation as atonement

Gutiérrez's definition of salvation as communion with God and neighbour compels us to assess the structures that influence the quality of our present experience of salvation and calls us to respond to God's gift of salvation by participating in God's communion-restoring work. Yet this account of salvation has not yet addressed the role of God's suffering on the cross – the pinnacle of divine solidarity – or stated how that solidarity might restore communion. This section addresses that question.

Gutiérrez's definition of salvation is surprisingly close to a classical way of understanding the mechanism of salvation (atonement), namely, by being united with us in the incarnation so that we might be united with God. Thomas F. Torrance summarises this classical position as follows:

> Th[e] one movement throughout the Old Testament and New Testament is the movement of God's grace in which he renews the bond between himself and humanity broken and perverted at the fall, and restores man to communion with himself. God does that by giving himself to man in such a way as to assume human nature and existence into oneness with himself. He condescends to enter into our human nature and so elevates it into union with his own divine nature.[25]

Torrance's view of the unity of incarnation and atonement is notable for its attention to patristic sources, the salvific efficacy of the whole life – not only the birth and death – of Jesus, and the connections between these doctrines and the Hebrew scriptures. Nevertheless, liberation theologians have helped us see Jesus' proximity to the vulnerable in his life, ministry and death in a way that Torrance did not. Attending to these contributions enhances Torrance's account of how divine solidarity saves.[26] There are three crucial points to make.

First, for Torrance, the incarnation itself is salvific, rather than merely a preparation for salvation: the Word made flesh gives us life and communion with God by communing with us. This is the ancient doctrine of the communication of attributes, which states, according to Kathryn Tanner, that, 'As a result of the incarnation, the characteristics of human life become the (alien) properties of the Word, and thereby the properties of the Word (its holiness, its life-enhancing powers) become the (alien) properties

[23]Ibid., p. 75.
[24]Ibid.
[25]Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 45.
[26]By 'solidarity' Torrance means the union of the Word with sinners (*Incarnation*, pp. 112, 137). Liberation theologians expand our understanding of divine solidarity by adding that human life – including Jesus' – is lived in contexts shaped by legal, economic and political structures brought about through human agency. The political dimensions of the whole life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus are important in this account of atonement.

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of humanity in a way that saves humanity from sin and death.'[27] This teaching follows the trajectory of thought that was crystallised in Athanasius' statement that the Word 'was made man that we might be made God', and that over the next few generations was clarified against Apollinarius, Nestorius and their followers.[28] One result of these controversies was to emphasise that it is God's communion with us, achieved fully in the incarnation and extending through Jesus' death and resurrection, that gives us communion with God and each other. The Word assumed the whole of human nature so that no part of human nature would be estranged from God. And it is exactly God's assumption of human nature – God's communing with us – that gives us communion with God.

Tanner has also teased out the implications of this account of the incarnation for the doctrine of atonement, beginning with a reorientation of the discussion around the basic meaning of the word 'atonement' as being made 'at one' with God: 'Humanity is at one with the divine in Jesus.'[29] This is simply what it means to call Jesus Emmanuel ('God with us') and the Word made flesh. For Jesus to be fully with us, however, he had to suffer like we do. Thus, for Tanner, Jesus had to suffer on the cross, not so that God would release our debts or grant us amnesty, nor yet as either a way of showing us God's great love or preparing for God's final victory in the resurrection. Jesus had to suffer so that 'the powers of the Word … [might] reach humanity suffering under the forces of sin and death'.[30] God suffered on the cross to give communion and life to suffering humanity. And human beings receive this communion and life with God by no other means than the Word's union with them in Jesus Christ. In short, God gives God's life to suffering humanity by communing with them so that they might gain life-giving communion with God.

These patristic sources, as well as modern authors influenced by them, aid this discussion of divine solidarity, but none of these authors makes as much of the social situation of the human being assumed by the Word as one might like. As Cone says, Jesus 'was not a "universal" man but a particular Jew who came to fulfill God's will to liberate the oppressed'.[31] Thus, lest we fall into something like a docetic disdain for the fleshly particularity of Jesus, we should follow the more recent trend of looking at the various social identities of the human being assumed by the Word.[32] This is the second point to

[27]Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), p. 254. There is no reason to assume that God communicates *all* of God's attributes to human beings, so that omnipresence, for instance, could be predicated of Jesus' humanity, as Lutheran sacramentology holds.

[28]Athanasius, 'On the Incarnation of the Word', in Edward Rochie Hardy (ed.), *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 107. I note this genealogy not to endorse *theosis* but to highlight the sources of the ideas that (1) the incarnation itself is salvific, and (2) it is salvific because there God became one with humanity and made humanity one with God in a way that necessarily gives humanity life. Thus, we can say that the Word became flesh, not so that we might *become God* (or *like God*), but rather so that we might *have fellowship with God*. This seems to be what Torrance meant when he said, 'He comes to be God for man in order to remake man for God' (*Incarnation*, p. 109). On 'participation' among reformed theologians, see Adam Neder, *Participation in Christ: An Entry into Karl Barth's* Church Dogmatics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009); and John Webster, '"The Visible Attests the Invisible"', in Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (eds), *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), pp. 96–113. My friend Tanner Capps has helped clarify my thought on these matters.

[29]Tanner, *Christ the Key*, p. 256.

[30]Ibid., p. 257.

[31]Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 109.

[32]Cone mentions this docetic tendency at several points; see, for example, *God of the Oppressed*, pp. 107, 109.

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make here: Jesus was not a Roman emperor or a priest in the Jerusalem Temple, but a Jew from Nazareth. He was not a *paterfamilias* who owned slaves but someone with nowhere to lay his head and dependent upon women for sustenance. He was from Galilee, on the edge of the Roman Empire and marginalised by Jerusalem because of its proximity to Samaria. And he was criminalised by Rome and executed in a way reserved for slaves, not citizens. When we look at Jesus, we see that the Word assumed poor, oppressed, marginalised flesh and was killed like a seditious slave. 'In him', says Cone, 'God becomes oppressed humanity'.[33]

One could certainly dispute Cone's claim that Jesus was oppressed. One could remind readers of Jesus' maleness in a patriarchal society; point out that there would have been poorer people than Jesus in his day, as there have been ever since; and note that any marginality Jesus experienced as a Galilean Jew would pale in comparison to the marginality of groups like the Samaritans or eunuchs.[34] One could make all of these cases to deny – or at least complicate – the assertion that Jesus was oppressed. But we would still have to consider Jesus' crucifixion as the defining feature of his story. His crucifixion would have been deemed 'emasculating';[35] and it would have been a reminder, especially to slaves, rebels and the poor, that Rome will not tolerate sedition.[36] Thus, although we should highlight the ways in which Jesus was *not* oppressed, the defining moment of his life suggests that he should be counted among the oppressed, even if not deemed the *most* oppressed.

There must be something theologically significant about God's decision to become *this* flesh and to suffer in *this* way, in all its social, historical, political and economic density. The Son of God assumes and heals the whole of human nature, to be sure, but the Son does so by becoming this particular Jewish man. This is the case not simply because there is no such thing as a person without a context. Rather, Israel's God has a history of making these types of scandalously particular decisions: '[t]he election of one for the salvation of all characterises the whole story of God's dealings with Israel'.[37] It is perfectly fitting for Israel's God to save both Jews and gentiles through the seed of Abraham, to deliver poor and rich alike through someone with nowhere to lay his head, to rescue the vulnerable and the venerable by becoming weak and ignoble, to overcome the terror of law and order by becoming a lawbreaker. God's determination to restore the world's broken communion comes from the underside of history.

[33]Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 121.

[34]Jesus was the son of an artisan, not a beggar; he spoke of the poor and the rich 'as groups of which he [was] not personally a member (Mark 14.7; Luke 6.20, 24)' (Christopher Bryan, *Render to Caesar: Jesus, the Early Church, and the Roman Superpower* (New York: OUP, 2005), p. 39); and he was supported by women of means (Luke 8:1–3). He may have had nowhere to lay his head, but this could mean either that he could not call anywhere home or that he was in fact poor. Either way, although Jesus was not the poorest of the poor, his circumstances were more precarious than those of the 'leading men' of his day.

[35]On this, among biblical scholars, see Brittany E. Wilson, 'Gender Disrupted: Jesus as a "Man" in the Fourfold Gospel', *Word and World* 36/1 (1 Jan. 2016), p. 31. Sarah Coakley has offered an account of Jesus' *kenosis* (self-emptying) as his 'choosing *never to have* certain (false and worldly) forms of power, sometimes wrongly construed as "divine"' (*Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), p. 11). Later in the same essay she categorises such 'forms of power' as 'masculinist' (p. 32).

[36]Much like lynching in the United States, crucifixion was an 'instrument of public terrorism', as Neil Elliott says in *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 95. On these matters more generally, see Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

[37]Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 109.

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Finally, liberation is nothing other than 'God's gift of definitive life to God's children'.[38] Since everyone dies, anyone who is resurrected to new life will be 'liberated'. However, the poor and vulnerable are especially close to the triune God, who protects their life and promises to vindicate them against their oppressors. The cross is closer to the lynching tree than to the deathbed of the powerful, and there is something fitting about God's suffering this type of fate, given God's identity as the liberator of slaves in Egypt and their protector in the wilderness.[39] In Jesus Christ, moreover, God gave food to the hungry and life to the dead. God repaired the lives of people broken by disease, demons and alienation. In all these instances, we see God giving vulnerable people life, just as the Word gives life to the human being assumed in the incarnation. Again, the Son of God came to give life to all people, but just as God has a special love for the often-oppressed people Israel, so God has special concern for the oppressed of all lands.

In sum: the Word gives life to the flesh by drawing near to it; the flesh assumed by the Word was oppressed flesh; the Word made flesh brought life to people threatened by death, including Jesus Christ himself. We can put together these three points to answer, finally, the leading question in this article, namely, how does divine solidarity liberate? Divine solidarity liberates because, as the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ is fully one with the vulnerable on the cross. On the cross, the poor are made to be 'at one' with God because there God is at one with them in the depths of their oppression. And if God is there united with oppressed flesh, then God is there giving life to that flesh. On the cross, the life-giving God tasted the limits of human vulnerability so that the vulnerable might experience the very life of God. The Son of God participates in subjection to the historical conditions of subjugation, marginalisation and oppression in order to give those who suffer similar conditions participation in God.

But what might it mean for the vulnerable to receive the life of God in the depths of their oppression? After all, the poor people Jesus fed, the sick people Jesus made well and even the people Jesus raised from the dead – all of them eventually died. Jesus himself died despite the fact that his humanity existed only in its union with the life-giving Word. Not even the most intimate of divine–human solidarity – the hypostatic union – kept Jesus alive. He had to hope for his resurrection from the dead, and so too must all human beings, including the masses of vulnerable people whose deaths are the least dignified and the most predictable. How then is God's abiding with the vulnerable in their oppression liberating? How does divine solidarity give life?

Jesus' resurrection from the dead, not his death, is the final word about how God's solidarity liberates, for the story was not over when the Son of God suffered on the cross and lay in the tomb: the dead Jesus needed to be raised to life. God's solidarity with the vulnerable is not the end of their story because fellowship with God is life: if God determines to have fellowship with us, then eventually that fellowship will result in the fullness of life – resurrection from the dead. Thus, although Bonhoeffer was right that only the suffering God can save, it would be wrong to say it is only God's suffering that saves. Not only God's presence with the oppressed on the cross but also the resurrection of Christ from the dead – both together – liberate the oppressed in that there, in both moments, the living God gives life. This may be the precise theological truth, rather than mere rhetorical excess, of Oscar Arnulfo Romero's well-known modification of

[38]Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, p. xxxix.

[39]James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011). It is worth noting, however, that while the cross is closer to the lynching tree, the two are not identical, since Jesus was sentenced to the cross following a trial, whereas lynchings were extrajudicial.

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Irenaeus: 'the glory of God is the poor person who lives'.[40] To say this is to say nothing more or less than that God is most glorified in giving life to the crucified Christ. Resurrection is the natural and desired result of the life-giving God's solidarity with the oppressed.

How God's suffering gives hope: *missio Dei*

To speak of the resurrection is not without problems, however, as it immediately raises the Marxist objection to Christian hope: does not our hope for final resurrection anaesthetise us to the plight of the oppressed by deferring hopes for transformed life to the age to come? One might avoid this criticism by collapsing divine agency into the human struggle for liberation. Thus, Cone says, 'the black revolution is God's kingdom becoming a reality in America'.[41] While this account of Christian hope rightly sees God's kingdom as already among us (Luke 17:21) and motivates struggles for liberation, Cone's language suggests that human beings cause the kingdom to come into existence, that it is realisable (if not fully 'realised') by human cooperation with God. But surely the human struggle to restore broken communion cannot, as Moltmann said in a different context, have 'a "causal character" for the Kingdom of God – even Pelagius never would have said that'.[42] Moreover, Cone's view of the relationship of the kingdom to contemporary struggles places the onus for realising God's kingdom on human beings (and oppressed human beings in particular). But surely the oppressed do not need to bear, in addition to the burdens of oppression, the burden of making history come out right. Thus, we do well, I think, not to follow Cone's realisable eschatology.

This is not to say Cone is of no use in responding to the Marxist critique of Christian hope. The key question is, does the God who was crucified and raised from the dead give life to the vulnerable *today*? Cone says, 'Jesus' past is the clue to his present activity'.[43] This present activity of Jesus is God's mission. The mission of God (*missio Dei*) is therefore the key to understanding how the life-giving, communion-restoring God is at work among us and gives us hope today. Now, given the record of Christians' horrific abuses of mission, especially among non-white people, it is good to hesitate more than a little when someone – especially a white man – suggests that 'mission' is how the oppressed will be liberated.[44] Nevertheless, if we remember that 'mission' means 'sending', and that Jesus Christ is the Son sent by the Father who sent the Spirit, then we are reminded that mission is first of all what *God* does in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, not what human beings do. For the triune God is a sending – that is, a missionary – God. The mission of this God is nothing like the mission of early-modern

[40]Cited in Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 233.

[41]Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 124.

[42]Jürgen Moltmann, 'On Latin American Liberation Theology: An Open Letter to José Míguez Bonino', *Christianity and Crisis* 36/5 (29 Mar. 1976), p. 58.

[43]Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 106. See also Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), p. 47: '[b]y discovering how [Jesus] functioned *then*, we will discover how he functions *today*'.

[44]On Western mission in Latin America and Africa, see, among many others, Luis N. Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992); José Míguez Bonino, *Faces of Latin American Protestantism*, trans. Eugene L. Stockwell (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997); and Willie J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

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Europeans, who disciplined, possessed and violated indigenous peoples around the world and made no room for the vulnerability that is the heartbeat of the God of the gospel. This God, after all, 'is in himself a permanent conversation, a communion of love, an identity of purpose and unity of action'.[45] Thus, when mentioning the word 'mission', we must reiterate what I said above about the person and work of the human being assumed by the Word: this Jew from Nazareth – dependent on women, marginalised by his people, criminalised by the imperial force of the day – is God's active presence in the world and therefore reveals to us the patterns of God's action in the world. Hence Cone's assertion that 'Jesus' past is the clue to his present activity'.

There are two sides to God's mission: God's action in the world, 'before our arrival and apart from all action of believers and churches', and our response as God takes us up into God's mission.[46] On the one hand, we see in Jesus Christ that God's active presence with suffering humanity on the cross was the shape of God's mission. Unless God's mission has changed, God continues to be in solidarity with those who suffer. Similarly, unless God's mission has changed, the Father who raised the crucified Christ from the dead must still send the life-giving Spirit to work among us today. Paul confirms this in Romans 8:11: 'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.'

On the other hand, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God incorporates us into God's work. This requires us to seek solidarity among the vulnerable, for as Roberto S. Goizueta says, 'to become a participant in the life of the crucified and risen Christ … implies a participation in the lives of those peoples who are themselves crucified victims'.[47] Moreover, this incorporation into God's work also requires us to organise with the oppressed for 'justice, mercy, God's peace (*shalom*) [as] embodied in good law, good government, a faithful community', as these are matters of life and death, fellowship and alienation.[48] To be sure, no amount of human justice, good law or government can cause the kingdom to come. Jesus Christ is the only human being in whom God's purposes of giving life and restoring communion are accomplished. The best we can do is participate imperfectly in God's mission. But God does graciously grant us a share in that mission and enables us to experience the life with God and each other that God desires for us. Any improvements upon broken communion that we achieve by God's grace are, therefore,

[45]Míguez Bonino, *Faces of Latin American Protestantism*, p. 115.

[46]Ibid., p. 124. One might say there is a third aspect of God's mission, namely, God's being within Godself a permanent conversation and communion of love (as Míguez Bonino put it). To say this, however, might suggest that God's being *in se* can be separated from God's being *ad extra*, as if God's work in the world were merely incidental to God's identity. I think John Flett is right that 'God's *movement* into the economy belongs to his being from all eternity', since God is eternally the triune God whose eternal will is for the Son and Spirit to be sent by the Father to draw creatures into God's own communal life. Flett, *The Witness of God*, p. 208.

[47]Roberto S. Goizueta, *Christ our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), p. 23.

[48]Míguez Bonino, *Faces of Latin American Protestantism*, p. 141. The quotes from Goizueta and Bonino correspond to Gutiérrez's exhortation to solidarity and protest, respectively, in *Theology of Liberation*, pp. 171–3.

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indications that the kingdom of God is among us, 'actually present, operative, authentically – however imperfectly and partially – realized'.[49]

Conclusion

In this article, I have brought together central themes in liberation theology (solidarity and liberation), a classical way of understanding the atonement and contemporary missional theology to state three ways in which God's solidarity with the vulnerable liberates. First, God's communion with suffering humanity creates communion with God and among human beings, and it calls us to improve that communion where it is broken. Second, attending to the sociopolitical context and performance of the human being assumed by the Word makes an incarnational account of atonement more obviously liberationist: God's solidarity with suffering humanity in Jesus Christ communicates life to the vulnerable and promises them resurrected life. Third, God incorporates us into God's life-giving, communion-restoring work today, inviting and enabling us to bear witness to that work in word and deed. Just as the Son of God gave life to the vulnerable body of Jesus, so God continues to give life to vulnerable bodies by being united to them. God liberates the oppressed by becoming 'at one' with them in the incarnate life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the continued presence and power of the Spirit of Christ today. The vulnerable are liberated because in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit the life-giving, communion-restoring God abides in active solidarity with them.

Few images of God conjure notions of divine power as much as the image of God the Liberator. This is as it should be, for while the powers arrayed against God's creatures are mighty, the God who liberates creatures from those powers is infinitely more powerful. But it is not quite right to put it this way: if the power of God is not the power of men [*sic*], domineering and distant, then the difference between divine and human power is not in the first instance quantitative, but qualitative. That is, the point is not in the first instance that God has more power than human beings, but that God exercises power in a profoundly different way, in that God's power, manifest in God's ability to liberate, is the power of God's love. In love God does not stand far off from the wretched conditions in which people find themselves, but rather God enters into such conditions to give the oppressed the life and communion that constitute the very identity of God as the one who loves in freedom (Barth). The triune God frees oppressed creatures because God is the eternal communion of love, and God frees such creatures by entering into the most intimate communion with them. The power of God the Liberator is the power of God's loving determination to bring life and communion to the most vulnerable of creatures by becoming a vulnerable creature.[50]

[49]José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 142.

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