

Some Labor to Perform?

Brigham Young's Theory of Atonement and Assurance

By David Golding

Observing a decline in piety among new immigrants to Utah Territory, Brigham Young expressed a determination to “stop bringing men and women” there only for them to eventually apostatize.¹ The majority of the Latter-day Saints in the area were upright and moral, he believed, but those converts who joined the Mormons to only alleviate their present “oppressed conditions” were souring their society.² After having overcome such tragic persecutions of years past in Missouri and Illinois, and having finally found safety in their mountain home, the Saints still could not shake their infidelities. Apostates had proven the most threatening to the church, and much of Brigham’s leadership had required significant interventions to maintain what his predecessor Joseph Smith had begun. Brigham had many reasons to do all he could to curb apostasy and to keep Mormon society unified, to say nothing of his temperament and leadership style. If need be, he would hurl thunderbolts from the pulpit, which he and others of the First Presidency very soon began to do.³

A reformation movement ensued in which the Saints as a whole were dramatically pressed upon to repent. Leaders even went so far as to require that all be re-baptized, themselves included.⁴ Between 1856 and 1857 the Mormon Reformation produced not only a resurgence in articulating and setting straight orthodox belief, but also a widespread cultural shift of gospel observance. Members’ conduct was brought into nearly every sermon; the theology was now almost entirely practical. Though Brigham and others

preached sermons of repentance and made repeated calls to action, and though the theology preached at this time generally served to define duties rather than to articulate scripture or belief, interestingly, Brigham here expounded one of his most speculative and controversial doctrines. He taught in September of 1856, at the height of the Reformation, that although some sins could be atoned for “by an offering upon an altar, as in ancient days” with the blood of a “lamb, of a calf, or of turtle doves,” certain sins could only be remitted by the shedding of man’s blood. “It is true that the blood of the Son of God was shed for sins,” he said, “yet men can commit sins which it can never remit.”⁵ Brigham later outlined this concept of “blood atonement” in ways that suggested that one righteous Mormon could do a service to a seriously wicked Mormon by shedding the wicked person’s blood. When a man “has committed a sin that he knows will deprive him of that exaltation he desires, and that he cannot attain to it without the shedding of his blood,” he will naturally see the wisdom of having another shed his blood, and “would be glad” to ask another to kill him as an atonement for his sins.⁶

Brigham referenced this idea of blood atonement both before and after the Reformation,⁷ and clearly had place for it in his overall theological understanding of the atonement of Jesus Christ and the nature of man’s fall from grace. But his blood atonement sermons of 1856–57 continue to be “among the most pointed and oft-referred to,”⁸ and have continually served as fodder for anti-Mormon attacks on Brigham Young’s character. Later church leaders repudiated such ideas in formal and informal pronouncements, expressing either that Brigham Young was out of line or that he was speaking as a theocratic-type governor who was forming a legal or moral basis for capital punishment in their society.⁹ Some historians have argued that blood atonement was nothing more than a tactic to scare away enemies or apostates from Utah and to cause repentance-inducing alarm among the Saints.¹⁰ The most serious criticisms of blood atonement link it to how southern Utah Mormon leaders justified their schemes during the Mountain Meadows Massacre.¹¹ But how much this concept of blood atonement informed Brigham Young’s theology of the atonement of Christ, or how much his understanding of the Atonement informed his ideas of blood atonement, regrettably remains excluded from much of the discourse on blood atonement and the man Brigham Young. In other words, exactly what Brigham believed

about the Atonement has received little critical attention, though his belief was central to his character and leadership, and has influenced contemporary Mormon soteriology. When seen in terms of Brigham's overall Atonement theory, blood atonement appears to have not been a conjuring up of radical doctrine to scare apostates, and likely was not as much speculation theory as it was a natural development.

Assurance doctrine

Like many other early Mormon converts, Brigham had belonged to a Protestant church before joining the Mormons. Having been given a "severe Methodist upbringing" as a youth, he joined the Methodists by 23 years of age and later converted to Mormonism in 1832.¹² By this time, he had worked in New York as a glazier, carpenter, joiner, and painter, and was known for his work ethic.¹³ The Methodists of his day had sent itinerants to the fields to preach the revival, which greatly contributed to the progress of the Second Great Awakening. Revivalists emphasized personal contact with the Spirit, worshipping in a communal and low-church pattern. For many Methodists, following Jesus was something everyone, from ecclesiastic and theologian to ordinary folk, could understand and accomplish, and this mindset was very much at the heart of Brigham's work ethic as a believer and churchgoer.¹⁴

One Methodist preacher who traveled throughout New York and Canada during Brigham's early adulthood, Nathan Bangs, sought to bring a "new sort of warfare" between Methodists and their competitors by producing a "piety that could appeal to the educated as well as the illiterate." Bangs' more systematic approach to Methodist theology emphasized a "practical" theology, proclaiming the "deity of Christ, the depravity of human beings, a universal atonement," and the need for faith and repentance. Bangs also earnestly preached what E. Brooks Holifield called three doctrines of practical piety — "the necessity of a new birth, the inner assuring witness of the Spirit, and 'holiness of heart and life.'"¹⁵ Brigham frequently stressed this same theology when teaching "the gospel" and the Atonement, and deviated very little from this strain of Methodist perfectionism advanced by revivalists like Bangs and Charles Finney. In the tradition of Joseph Smith, however, Brigham did consider "the gospel" to be ever expanding before his mind, with truths yet to

discover and revelations yet to come down from heaven. He only added where Methodists had come short.¹⁶ Methodist perfectionism, then, parts ways with Brigham once he explores how Atonement affects one's place in kingdoms of glory, how it redeems the dead, and in other advancements in Joseph Smith's cosmology.

In response to the high Calvinism of the time, Wesleyan Methodists emphasized the agency of the human spirit and baptism as a "saving ordinance" wherein a conditional covenant was entered into by the initiate.¹⁷ The full benefits from baptism required repentance and faith, even though many Wesleyans considered the Atonement to be much more pervasive, gracious, and imminent—at the center of literally "everything." Christ died for everyone, everyone should be able to benefit.¹⁸ Not only did this concept of Atonement conflict with John Calvin's limited atonement doctrine, but it also opened up the Methodist-Calvinist divide on the question of assurance. Interestingly, the Wesleyan doctrine of assurance followed much of the same lines as Joseph Smith's later concepts of having one's calling and election made sure. Through "adoption," a sinner could be regenerated enough to merit an assurance of forgiveness in the eternities. This adoption could be made known to the individual through "the direct witness of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the Christian."¹⁹

Joseph Smith introduced a similar doctrine, except added that this assurance of forgiveness in the eternities not only came by way of the Holy Spirit's revelation but also through priesthood ordinance performed in the temple.²⁰ Brigham received the ordinance of being ordained to the "fulness of the priesthood" in November of 1843 in Nauvoo.²¹ Both Wesleyans and Joseph Smith emphasized that this assurance, whether by priesthood ordinance or by a spiritual affirmation, came in and through the Atonement alone—but the person must merit the blessing through faith, repentance, baptism, and obedience. Contrary to Calvinist doctrines of election, God did not determine whether the Atonement would save a particular soul but it was through the person's choice to choose Christ that began the process of sanctification and ultimately the fulfillment of unconditional promise of salvation either in this life or in the next.²² Even in a more radical doctrine that assurance could be had in the flesh, Methodists and Smith alike remained incredibly practical in their theology.

Atonement theory

In Utah, Brigham preached a universal but also legalistic Atonement. “Christ has died for all,” he taught, “but we can receive the benefit of his atonement on his conditions only, not our own.” The Atonement’s reality and imminence was a given; individual acceptance of the Atonement was not. One must obey the commandments to enjoy the fullness of what the Atonement offered for fallen men and women. “We must repent of our sins and be baptized ... and have the laying on of hands for the reception of the Holy Ghost so that the spirit of the Gospel will live within us.”²³ Hearing the Atonement preached was definitely not enough. Suppose one heard the doctrine of redemption through the Atonement and believe it to be fact, he once said,

but instead of inquiring, ‘Is there anything for me to do? is there any labor for me to perform?’ ... are we entitled to have hands laid upon us for the reception of the Holy Ghost? No.... [If] we [do] not obey, we would not be entitled to any of these blessings from the Father.... We could not merit, we could not be entitled to, we could not claim at the hand of our God those blessings that he had promised through obedience to his Word.... We would be in the path that leads to death.²⁴

Despite believing in such conditional features of divine grace, Brigham still considered grace through the Atonement universally salvific, declaring that with the exception of those that sin against the Holy Ghost all the world will be saved.²⁵ “Is not this Universalism?” he asked. Jesus Christ “is compassionate to all the works of His hands, the plan of His redemption, and salvation, and mercy is stretched out over all.” Christ planned to “save all the inhabitants” of the earth. However, Brigham did not consider it wise to take this doctrine and assume that what men and women do does not matter. Damnation was as imminent as salvation. When teaching that all would be saved, Brigham qualifies this doctrine by saying that damned souls would not go on forever suffering in hell.²⁶ Escaping damnation required, in simple terms, three things: a belief and acceptance of the Atonement; baptism and confirmation by proper priesthood authority; and continual obedience until one’s election is made sure. The Atonement would “save the whole human family,” he taught in 1870, “if we accept the terms [Christ] has laid down....

[B]elieve on the Lord Jesus Christ, keep his commandments, and obey his ordinances, that it may be well with you.”²⁷ Damnation itself was nothing more than a person being delivered to a state of being where one makes an atonement for his or her own sins alone and without the helping powers of the atonement of Christ. “If as good a man as Jesus Christ went to hell, we may well expect that a wicked and ungodly man will go there to atone for his sins.”²⁸ Brigham based his idea of a universal salvation on a concept of law, explaining that regardless of how one person acts in life, he or she would be judged on their own understanding and moral code. “Will the heathen be saved? Yes, so far as they have lived according to the best light and intelligence they had; but not in the Celestial kingdom.”²⁹ He clearly saw the necessary choice as being between accepting Christ’s atonement or one’s own; the Atonement spared one from atoning for one’s own sins, provided the individual obeyed the terms of Jesus’ sacrifice.

Brigham believed in the shedding of blood as a necessary component of an efficacious atonement. Blood and sin held a common agent that produced humankind, and spilling blood served as a kind of purifying act, a way to counteract the effects of the Fall.³⁰ Jesus Christ alone could perform an atonement for the whole human race because of his priesthood. “No man, or nation of men, without the Priesthood,” he said, “has power to make atonement for such sins.”³¹ This aspect of the Atonement likely informed Brigham’s concept of blood atonement, as he negotiated his ideas of celestial laws and grace. For Brigham, a celestial order was fixed and inviolate, and even Christ could not rearrange the path leading to exaltation.³² Jesus fulfilled his role by teaching humankind the path, showing them the way, and making repentance a possibility through the shedding of his blood.³³ How the Father established his kingdoms and prepared a way for the exaltation of his children was by crafting eternal laws designed to bring about such an end. Because of free will, human beings can violate these laws or live in harmony with them.³⁴ By participating in a world of dualisms, humankind fulfills the object of life and may achieve happiness on a godlike scale; the opposites “subject [us] to sin” but ultimately allow for us to conceive of God’s level of joy. Such subjection to sin and mortality (blood), necessitated the need of a savior, one who would atone by spilling his blood for all. One who resists the Atonement will inevitably endure the fixed outcome of sin which is to have his or her own

blood shed, though Brigham never fully described how this could be done in the afterlife in a spiritual sense.³⁵ In a way, blood atonement in the afterlife appears more like a spiritual agony akin to the agony Christ endured in Gethsemane that caused him to sweat drops of blood. “He will be damned,” Brigham described. In hell “he will lift up his eyes, being in torment, until he has paid the uttermost farthing, and made a full atonement for his sins.”³⁶

Brigham clearly emphasized in his sermons the place of the sinner more than the role of Jesus Christ when discussing the Atonement. His was a practical ethic with a lofty goal—to achieve the guarantee of exaltation in this life, if possible, but definitely prepare the way to achieve it in the next life through adherence to the laws of God established for that purpose. His concept of Jesus’ role and the preeminence of Christ in the plan of salvation as the atoning one, however, was brought into relief during an episode in which an apostle, Amasa Mason Lyman, publicly came into conflict with his quorum brethren on this subject.

In 1862, Lyman—characterized earlier by an anonymous observer as a more “liberal” and “advanced” theologian who propagated the “universal” ideals of Mormonism—declared that Christ was only a moral reformer, and that his atonement was not necessary for salvation. Men and women were inherently good, and redemption came about through one’s own personal correction of self in adherence to purer morals. After returning from England in 1863, Brigham first heard of Lyman’s Atonement doctrine when told of a sermon Lyman had delivered in Beaver, Utah in which he denied the divinity of Christ and the efficacy of the Atonement. During a tour to southern Utah settlements, Brigham reacted to Lyman publicly, asking whether he had preached such a sermon to which Lyman replied that he “had never thought of preaching that doctrine.” Brigham continued the sermon, preaching on the importance of Jesus’ divinity and atonement. Throughout, he continued probing Lyman with questions relating to Christ’s role in the Atonement—whether he was preaching what Lyman had previously preached in Beaver and whether a savior was needed to account for justice and mercy, to which Lyman replied in each instance to Brigham’s satisfaction.³⁷

The situation worsened, however, after Lyman’s 1862 sermon came to Brigham’s attention in January 1867, almost five years after the fact. He immediately convened meetings with the Quorum of the Twelve and First

Presidency to decide whether to take action, and they concluded that Lyman was to openly declare his error, and in particular no longer “deny the blood of Christ and say that it was not necessary.” Lyman drafted a confession, but Brigham was not yet satisfied. He wanted Lyman to affirm the “Sacrifice and Atonement made by Jesus Christ in opening up the way of salvation to mankind, and that without his death we would all have been lost,” to which Lyman did eventually write, sign, and circulate to the members of the church.³⁸ But the confession did not last, and Lyman returned to preaching in favor of mysticism and against the efficacy of the Atonement. Brigham responded by touring areas where Lyman had preached and personally insisted on the place of Christ in the Atonement, the divine role Jesus performed as mediator, and the heterodoxy of declaring anything more or less than such. As Lyman continued in his preaching, Brigham did not budge, ultimately allowing the apostle to be disfellowshipped, dismissed from the Quorum, and eventually excommunicated for the heretical preaching.³⁹ For Brigham, the role of Christ as the one and only savior of humankind and the only one who could atone for sin was not negotiable. A priesthood holder must believe the doctrine in those terms or risk forfeiting his priesthood or apostleship.

During the Mormon Reformation, Brigham’s concept of atonement came out in bold relief. Whether or not his declarations of blood atonement doctrine were motivated by a desire to justify capital punishment in a theocracy or to instill fear in apostates whom he hoped would up and leave their fragile Zion, Brigham at least exhibits a place in his overall ideas of the Atonement for such a possibility. He believed in, had participated in, and advanced the doctrine of assurance in the minds of the Saints which had doubly entered his life through his early Methodism and his close participation with Joseph Smith in Nauvoo. The limbo of not knowing one’s final place in the eternities could afflict one with suspense and doubt. All would necessarily be saved from eternal damnation, but that was beside the point; without an assurance in this life of exaltation in the next, one’s agony could still be acute. One’s guarantee was in the atonement of Christ, which could only be had in submitting to priesthood ordinances and in living an obedient and righteous life. Because of the fixed laws governing the path to exaltation, Jesus’ could not budge and make exceptions; each would have to

accept of his blood sacrifice or remain sullied by sin even after death. How, then, could one be assured of exaltation when he or she had broken the necessary covenants, for which there is no forgiveness in this world or in the world to come? Or worse, what of the Saints to whom Brigham had personally administered the ordinances of assurance that had fallen into apostasy?⁴⁰ The promise, maybe, was still in effect, but what potential condemnation and suspense—a kind of present damnation—might the apostate endure without some atonement? In these cases, the apostate bludgeoned the Atonement with their sinful rejection beyond any confidence and efficacy. In such a predicament, an atonement could still be made, but an atonement of the offender's own blood. By making such an atonement, the offender could have that assurance that all that was possible had been done to secure a place in the Celestial Kingdom.

Regardless of how blood atonement and the atonement of Christ ultimately formed through Brigham Young's life experience and thought, Brigham's emphasis on obedience persisted throughout his tenure. More than once he proclaimed the Atonement in a marriage with obedience: "Let the Lord speak, and let the people obey" was his motto. "That is the way to gain happiness which all man kind are seeking... Without strict observance to the laws by which worlds were and are created—to the words of the Eternal, no being can inherit eternal lives."⁴¹ Like the Methodists he grew up with, Brigham believed in the inverse of the high Calvinism in America at the time of his youth, a theology that limited the Atonement and spoke of an unconditional election. The Atonement for Brigham was universal yet one's election was entirely conditional and dependent on one's works. To a son he wrote about six months before his death, "To obtain the full benefit of that atonement made by our Lord and Savior is within our reach—is ours—fully and completely, but only so, on condition of our faithfulness in observing our covenants and obligations to keep the divine commandments given to us."⁴²

There was no question about Brigham's belief in the centrality of Christ and the Atonement. When brought into confrontation, with a fellow apostle no less, he did not yield or shift his doctrine in the slightest. Amasa Lyman came up against a solid wall in Brigham and in the end lost his membership in the church. The strict preacher during the Reformation twenty years later still demanded acceptance of the Atonement, albeit with softer tones. Perhaps,

with his life tempered by leading a church through severe trials despite his own personal assurance of exaltation he had received in 1843, he could only then explain the rigor needed to not fall from that level of grace.

But my feelings are very acute; what I see and hear oftentimes causes me to sorrow and wonder, and I feel to exclaim, "O Lord, have mercy upon us, thy people!" How easy it is for us to forget the Lord who atoned for us, and to depart from his ways... But the weakness of the flesh is so great that we need continually the influence of our Father through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to hold us to the truth, in order that we may not fall...⁴³

Notes

- ¹ Paul H. Peterson, "The Mormon Reformation of 1856–1857: The Rhetoric and the Reality," *Journal of Mormon History* 15 (1989), 61.
- ² Brigham Young, sermon, April 6, 1855, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–1886), 2:251. Hereafter cited as *JD*.
- ³ Peterson, 67.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.
- ⁵ Young, *JD*, 4:54.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 4:219.
- ⁷ Cf. William Smith, "A Proclamation," *Warsaw Signal* (Warsaw, Illinois: 1845), vol. 2 no. 32, October 29 for one reference to blood atonement before the Reformation.
- ⁸ Peterson, 67.
- ⁹ B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 4:126 (cited hereafter as *Comprehensive History*); First Presidency letter, February 12, 1971; Wilford Woodruff, letter to editor of *Illustrated American*, January 9, 1891; Bruce R. McConkie, letter to Thomas B. McAfee, October 18, 1978.
- ¹⁰ Peterson, 67.
- ¹¹ Cf. Ronald Walker, et al., *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) for an overview of historians' claims of blood atonement and the massacre.
- ¹² Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 190.
- ¹³ Leonard J. Arrington and Larry C. Porter, "Brigham Young," in *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History*, Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, Richard O. Cowan, eds. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 1375.
- ¹⁴ Edwin Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt, *The Religious History of America: The Heart of the American Story from Colonial Times to Today*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 145.
- ¹⁵ E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 257.
- ¹⁶ Young, *JD*, 1:80.
- ¹⁷ Holifield, 269.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 267.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 269.

²⁰ David John Buerger, “The Fulness of the Priesthood’: The Second Anointing in Latter-day Saint Theology and Practice,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16, no. 1, 16; Devery S. Anderson and Gary James Bergera, *Joseph Smith’s Quorum of the Anointed, 1842–1845: A Documentary History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2005), xxvii–xxix.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²² Holifield, 260–72; Bushman, 497–98.

²³ Young, *JD*, 13:220.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 16:164–65.

²⁵ “Do not conclude that I am a Universalist, as the term is generally understood, although that doctrine is true in part...” Brigham said in 1860, *JD*, 8:34.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:92–93.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13:331.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:185.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8:34.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4:54, 4:219–20, 7:3–4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2:32; cf. *JD* 3:247.

³² *Ibid.*, 4:219–20.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9:310.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8:36.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 11:42–44.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11:268.

³⁷ Loretta L. Hefner, “From Apostle to Apostate: The Personal Struggle of Amasa Mason Lyman,” *Dialogue* 16, no. 1, 93.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 97; 98–101.

⁴⁰ Examples include Amasa Lyman, John D. Lee, William Marks, and George Miller, to name only a few (Anderson and Bergera, 215, 226–28).

⁴¹ Young, *JD*, 7:3–4.

⁴² Brigham Young, *Letters of Brigham Young to His Sons*, Dean C. Jessee, ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1974), 259.

⁴³ Young, *JD*, 19:2–3.

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