

Examining Christian Doctrine

Lesson 18: The Words and Works of Jesus Part 6: – Atonement Theories

Last lesson we looked at the atoning work of Jesus Christ in his death on the cross, burial, and resurrection, as we defined atonement, looked at the Old Testament roots of atonement, and the New Testament teaching. However simple at we might have understood it, the issue of the doctrine and nature of the atonement has been much debated throughout the history of the church. In this lesson, we will look at some of the critiques about the atonement, how the doctrine was developed, and the various views of the atonement.

Development of the Doctrine of Atonement

When it comes to the workings of the atonement, there are a lot of aspects to consider. The scriptures in the New Testament paint a multifaceted picture of the atonement, using many different images, metaphors, and words.

- Substitution: Jesus 'took our place' and died for us
- Sacrifice: the Lamb of God was offered as a sacrifice for us. He shed his blood and 'took our punishment'. These images come from the Old Testament and shared in ways that the people of Israel would understand.
- Propitiation: the appeasing of wrath (God's wrath), Christ 'satisfied the demands/wrath'
- Ransom: Christ gave his life as a ransom for many, he 'paid the price' for our sin (Mark 10:45)
- Redemption: buying back or liberating from slavery
- Victory: portrays Christ's death as 'he won the victory' over the powers of sin, death and the devil
- Healing: atonement is depicted as bringing spiritual healing
- Example: Christ's sacrificial death presented an example for believers to follow (1 Peter 2:21)

Because the Bible uses so many descriptions of the atonement, many 'atonement theories' have rose up in the church over its history, emphasizing the various views of atonement.

1. Substitutionary Atonement: Along with the Ransom Theory, the idea of substitution was a predominant view of atonement in the early church. The Epistle to Diognetus records, *"in his mercy he took upon himself our sin; he himself gave us his own Son as a ransom for us."* Clement noted, *"our Lord Jesus Christ gave his own blood for us, by the will of God: his flesh for our flesh, his soul for our souls."*

Substitutionary Atonement focuses on the idea that Jesus Christ, through his sacrificial death on the cross, served as a substitute for humanity to reconcile humanity with God. Early Christian theologians often appealed to Old Testament sacrificial typology to explain Christ's substitutionary atonement. They saw parallels between the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, where animals were offered as substitutes for sinners, and Christ's ultimate sacrifice on the cross.

Substitutionary Atonement as understood by early Christian theologians laid foundational principles that influenced later theological developments, including the formulation of more detailed theories such as Anselm's Satisfaction theory and the later development of Penal Substitutionary Atonement during the Reformation.

2. Ransom Theory: The Ransom Theory of the Atonement is one of the first major theories for the atonement and one of the earliest held by the early church. Ransom Theory begins with the premise that humanity is enslaved to sin, death, and the devil as a result of the Fall in the Garden of Eden. Sin has subjected humanity to the power of Satan, who holds them captive (Hebrews 2:14-15).

In this theory, Jesus' death on the cross is seen as a ransom payment made to Satan. This payment is necessary to secure the liberation of humanity from bondage. The idea is that Satan had a legal claim or authority over humanity due to their sinfulness, and Christ's death was the payment to satisfy the claim and release humanity.

The focus of Ransom Theory is on the victory of Christ over the powers of evil. By his sacrificial death, Christ defeats Satan and liberates humanity from bondage. This liberation is seen as a restoration of humanity's freedom and a reversal of the consequences of sin. The Ransom theory was an early form, and influenced the Christus Victor theory.

3. Christus Victor: The term "Christus Victor" is Latin for "Christ the Victor," highlighting Christ's triumph in this cosmic battle. The Christus Victor theory has roots in early Christian thought and theological reflection, particularly in the writings of the early church fathers such as Irenaeus of Lyons (2nd century).

Christus Victor teaches that through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus achieves victory over sin, death, Satan, and the Powers of this world. By living a sinless life and offering himself as the perfect sacrifice, Christ overcomes the consequences of human sinfulness and opens the way for humanity to be reconciled with God.

Central to Christus Victor is the idea that Jesus' death and resurrection defeat the powers of darkness, including Satan and demonic forces. This victory is not just a moral or legal triumph but a cosmic liberation from spiritual oppression.

Through his victory, Christ reconciles humanity with God and restores the relationship that was broken by sin. This reconciliation is achieved through Christ's redemptive work, which restores humanity to God's intended state of communion.

4. Satisfaction Theory: Satisfaction theory is often associated with Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109). This is the idea that the atonement of Jesus is satisfaction or compensation for the Father. This is almost like ransom theory, but the person who's being paid back is God and not Satan. This theory was actually developed in reaction to the historical dominance of the Ransom theory to which Anselm taught that it is humanity who owes a debt to God, not God to Satan. Our debt, in this theory, is that of injustice. So in this theory, Jesus Christ's death is understood as a death to satisfy the justice of God.

Anselm argues that because humans owe God perfect obedience and honor, any deviation from this perfect obedience (sin) creates a debt that must be paid. This debt cannot simply be overlooked or forgiven without proper satisfaction, as it would compromise God's justice and honor.

In Satisfaction theory, Christ's sacrificial death on the cross is seen as the ultimate act of satisfaction. As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ voluntarily offers himself as a perfect and sinless sacrifice to satisfy the debt of sin that humanity owes to God. Christ's obedience unto death demonstrates the supreme honor and obedience that humanity owes to God, thereby satisfying divine justice.

5. Penal Substitutionary Atonement Theory (PSA): This view is the predominant evangelical view of atonement in our modern time. This view gained significant prominence during the Protestant Reformation, particularly in the theological writings of Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin.

The reformers took Anselm's Satisfaction theory and modified it slightly. They added a more legal (or forensic) framework into this notion of the cross as satisfaction (of course John Calvin was a lawyer). To them, it was not that God's honor was offended. It was that God, the ultimate judge of the universe, cannot let human sin go unpunished.

The result is that within Penal Substitution, Jesus Christ suffers divine judgement and dies to satisfy God's wrath against human sin. Jesus is punished (penal) in the place of sinners (substitution) as God's wrath is poured out on him in order to satisfy the justice of God and appease the legal demand of God to punish sin. In the light of Jesus' death, God can now forgive the sinner because Jesus Christ has been punished in the place of the sinner, in this way meeting the retributive requirements of God's justice.

This theory of the Atonement contrasts with Anselm's Satisfaction Theory in that God is not satisfied with a debt of justice being paid by Jesus, but that God is satisfied with punishing Jesus in the place of mankind. The notion that the cross acts upon God, conditioning Him to forgiveness, originates from Anselm's theory, but here in Penal Substitution the means are different.

Clarifications About the Teaching of the Atonement

I believe that there are some false pictures that can be painted as it concerns atonement theories and especially penal atonement. Below I've listed a few of these concerns and critiques.

God is not and Angry, Wrathful God who is also a divine child abuser: A caricature in PSA is the perception that God is an angry God who is out to pour his wrath upon humanity because of their sin. In response he pours out his wrath upon His Son to appease his anger. Thus the cross becomes a place of child sacrifice and divine child abuse.

Did Jesus go to the cross to save us from the Father? In the above scenario, it's God who acts as 'bad cop' who is out to punish the people, and Jesus acts as 'good cop' who comes to our rescue and, instead of saving us from sin and it's punishment, actually comes to save us from God. This is not an accurate picture of the nature of the Father.

Why did God need a blood sacrifice? Is he a blood thirsty God who operates in brutal and archaic ways? The sacrificial imagery in Scripture needs to be understood in its cultural and historical context. In ancient societies, sacrifices were often symbolic acts of reconciliation and restoration rather than appeasing a bloodthirsty deity. The Old Testament sacrificial system foreshadowed Christ's ultimate sacrifice, demonstrating God's plan for redemption and reconciliation (Hebrews 9:22-28). The issue was not that 'God needed blood' but showing the principle of 'a life for a life'. Christ was willing to give his life for us.

Was there disunity in the Trinity when Jesus went to the cross? One common theme you will hear that is a result of PSA is that 'God forsook Jesus on the cross', or that 'God turned His back on His Son', or something along those lines. The major proof-text used for this is when Jesus said from the cross '*My God, My God why have you forsaken me?*' (Matt. 27:46). Many interpretations and ideas (and songs) have been given for this verse. It is of my opinion that *God did not actually forsake His Son on the cross*. Here are some reasons.

1. Jesus in his full humanity could have definitely *felt* forsaken by God in this moment, but Jesus' human emotion doesn't prove that from the Father's end that he was forsaken.
2. This wording comes from Psalm 22:1 (first uttered by David who also felt forsaken, and David was also speaking for all of Israel). After this introduction and lament for suffering (also speaking about Jesus' death (v. 7-8), David has a change of perspective when he says in verse 24 "For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.
3. Finally, this Psalm ends up being a Messianic Psalm, pointing Israel toward their coming Messiah and his kingdom rule, v. 28 "for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations." Thus Jesus in quoting the first verse of this Psalm, is letting the people know that this Psalm is about Him.
4. For God to forsake His Son would bring a disunity and division in the Trinity. Jesus was one with the Father and always remained one with the Father.

These issues above are false, and (sometimes intentionally) over-exaggerated view of God and a wrong idea about God's wrath and the object of God's wrath. Consider these thoughts

- John 3:16 says 'For God so loved the world' (not God was so angry with the world)
- Jesus (being God) willingly went to the cross for us
- Jesus suffered the punishment of sin (for the wages of sin is death), but He Himself was not punished by the Father
- Sin was condemned in the body of Jesus (Rom. 8:3), it wasn't Jesus that was condemned by the Father
- Sin was the object of wrath, not Jesus.
- God was 'in Christ' reconciling the world to Himself, not apart from Christ executing punishment
- Jesus did not suffer the wrath of God, he suffered the wrath of our sin (and became cursed under the law) to overcome sin for us.
- God 'sending Jesus', 'giving his own Son', 'laying on him our iniquity', was the plan of redemption, and the cooperation of both Father and Son makes up the full picture of the lengths that God would go through to show us how much He loves us and was willing to go through to bring restoration and reconciliation.
- The cross was the ultimate act of love.

Conclusion

While the church has emphasized various atonement theories over the years, it's important to understand that the Bible does not speak univocally on this subject. It gives many various words, images, and metaphors to describe Christ's work on the cross. I do not believe that the Bible espouses one single theory of atonement, but purposefully presents the atonement in a multifaceted way to describe the vastness of Christ's work for us.

These are views that people can relate to whether from an Old Covenant Jewish viewpoint (sacrifice), or a Greek/Roman viewpoint (the powers). We can see how Christ legally atoned for our sins (justification), but also how it was God's love brings us into a perfect vital relationship with him (reconciliation). We can also see how because of what Christ did, we have complete victory over every spiritual enemy resulting in our freedom from sin, the devil, the world, and Satan. And finally we can see how just as Jesus gave his life sacrificially for all, we should do the same for others as we love sacrificially, give sacrificially, and serve sacrificially.

I believe we should see the value in all the aspects of the atonement as the Bible presents them, while at the same time rejecting the unbiblical pictures and assumptions that have been made over the years. Just like all doctrine, we must view the truth of the cross and atonement through what Jesus revealed about the Father. We can hold to the truths of atonement such as substitution, sacrifice, etc. without a warped view of God and without pitting God against Jesus.

The atonement is the central tenant of Christianity. Without Christ's atonement work on the cross we would have no Christianity, no message, no life, and no hope. May we behold the beauty of something so cruel as the cross, and receive the love that God has for us, which was shown to us through Christ willingly giving his life for us.

You are to die for.