

Jesus Christ: Why did He Come and What did He Accomplish?
Part Four

Theories of the Atonement

The various theories of Christ's atoning death can be broken down based on the object or focus or orientation of his sufferings. In other words, *on whom or on what do the sufferings of Jesus terminate?* Objective theories of the atonement are those that envision his death as terminating on God. Subjective theories insist that Christ's sufferings focus on human beings with a view to inducing some change or experiential reaction in us.

A. ***Theories Emphasizing the Objective Nature of Christ's Atoning Death.*** These are theories that interpret the sufferings of Christ as *terminating primarily on God.*

1. *The Satisfaction Theory of St. Anselm.* Anselm put it this way (with slight paraphrasing):

"Satisfaction cannot be made unless there be some One able to pay God for man's sin something greater than all that is beside God. . . . Now nothing is greater than all that is beside God except God Himself. None therefore can make this satisfaction except God. And none ought to make it except man. . . . If, then, it be necessary that the kingdom of heaven be completed by man's admission, and if man cannot be admitted unless the aforesaid satisfaction for sin be first made, and if God only *can*, and man only *ought* to make this satisfaction, then necessarily One must make it who is both God and man" (Book II, ch. 6).

In other words, only we owe the debt, but we cannot pay it. Only God can pay the debt, but he does not owe it. Therefore, only a God-man, i.e., Jesus Christ, can both bear the guilt of human sin and pay the debt incurred by it. This is *Cur Deus Homo* . . . this is why God became man!

How could the death of Christ honor God and sufficiently outweigh the sins of men? Anselm gives us three answers. (1) Since the God-man offered to God a gift he did not owe, the gift is adequate to pay for our sins. (2) The God-man did not deserve to die. His death was entirely voluntary. Thus his death, unlike that of all other men, was meritorious in God's sight. (3) Anselm points out that the assault on Christ is the greatest sin imaginable (Book II, ch. 14). Therefore, since he willed to endure this greatest of all injustices, the merit of his death is itself the greatest imaginable and more than suffices to outweigh the sins of mankind.

2. *The Theory of Vicarious Confession and/or Repentance*

John McLeod Campbell (1800-1872) – This theory was articulated by Campbell in his book *The Nature of the Atonement* (1856). He argued that God's justice is satisfied, not by Christ enduring the penalty of the law, but by his perfect confession of sin on our behalf. Christ uttered forth in his life and death a heart-felt "Amen!" to the assessment of God against human rebellion:

"We feel that such a repentance as we are supposing would be the true and proper satisfaction to offended justice, and that **there would be more atoning worth in one tear of the true and perfect sorrow than in endless ages of penal woe**" (125).

B. ***Theories Emphasizing the Subjective Nature of Christ's Atoning Death***

Subjective theories of the atonement are those which envision the focus or aim of Christ's sufferings to be the human soul rather than God himself. This model is referred to either as the *moral influence* theory or the *example* theory.

1. *The Moral Influence theory of Peter Abelard (1079-1142)* - Abelard argued that there is nothing in God's nature that necessitates satisfaction or prevents him from indiscriminately forgiving all at any time. He argued that the love of God in giving up his Son was designed to kindle in our hearts a corresponding

love and repentance which together become the ground for the forgiveness of our sins. Thus the object of Christ's death is not God but man. His aim was not to satisfy the Father's wrath but to stimulate our love.

2. *The example theory of Faustus Socinus (1539-1604)*

"There is no such justice in God as requires absolutely and inexorably that sin be punished, and such as God himself cannot repudiate. There is, indeed, a perpetual and constant justice in God; but this is nothing but his moral equity and rectitude, by virtue of which there is no depravity or iniquity in any of his works. . . . Hence, they greatly err who, deceived by the popular use of the word justice, suppose that justice in this sense is a perpetual quality in God, and affirm that it is infinite. . . . Hence it might with much greater truth be affirmed that that compassion which stands opposed to justice is the appropriate characteristic of God" (*Praelectiones Theologicae*, Caput xvi; *Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum*, I, 566).

"The common and, as you would say, orthodox view is, that Jesus Christ is our Savior, because He made full satisfaction for our sins to the divine justice through which we sinners deserved to be condemned, and this satisfaction is through faith imputed by the gift of God to us who believe. But I hold, and think it to be the orthodox view, that Jesus Christ is our Savior because he announced to us the way of eternal salvation, confirmed, and in his own person, both by the example of his life and by rising from the dead, clearly showed it [i.e., eternal life], and will give that eternal life to us who have faith in him. And I affirm that he did not make satisfaction for our sins to the divine justice, . . . nor was there any need that he should make satisfaction" (*De Servatore*, chp. 1).

"Christ takes away sins because by heavenly and most ample promises He attracts and is strong to move all men to penitence, whereby sins are destroyed. . . . He takes away sins because by the example of His most innocent life, He very readily draws all, who have not lost hope, to leave their sins and zealously to embrace righteousness and holiness" (*Prael. Theol.*, 591).

Thus, Christ bore our sins in the sense that he took them away from us *by inciting us* to abandon them. In all that he did, Christ inspires us to repent and forsake our sin in order that we might walk in obedience; and it is by this repentance and obedience that God receives us into his favor.

3. *Horace Bushnell (1802-76) and Hastings Rashdall (1858-1924)*. Bushnell openly denies any form of substitution in Christ's death and articulates an updated version of Abelard's moral influence theory:

"On the other hand, we are not to hold the Scripture terms of vicarious sacrifice, as importing a literal substitution of places, by which Christ becomes a sinner for sinners, or penally subject to our deserved penalties. That is a kind of substitution that offends every strongest sentiment of our nature. He cannot become guilty for us. Neither, as God is a just being, can He be anyhow punishable in our place – all God's moral sentiments would be revolted by that" (*Forgiveness and Law*, 79).

"By the previous exposition Christ is shown to be a Savior, not as being a ground of justification, but as being the Moral Power of God upon us, so a power of salvation. His work terminates, not in the release of penalties by due compensation, but in the transformation of character, and the rescue, in that manner, of guilty men from the retributive causations provoked by their sin" (449).

C. *The Theory of Christus Victor*

1. *Origen and the Ransom to Satan (Classic) Theory*. Origen explains:

"If then we were 'bought with a price,' as also Paul asserts, we were doubtless bought from one whose servants we were, who also named what price he would for releasing those whom he held from his power. Now it was the devil that held us, to whose side we had been drawn away by our sins. He asked, therefore, as our price the blood of Christ" (*In Rom.* II, 13; cf. *In Exod.*, VI, 9).

“To whom gave He His life ‘a ransom for many’? It cannot have been to God. Was it not then to the evil one? For he held us until the ransom for us, even the soul of Jesus was paid to him” (*In Matt.*, XVI, 8).

This theory often takes one of four forms.

- First, some contend that Christ paid a direct ransom to Satan, the latter being deceived as to the true nature of the transaction. When Satan accepted Christ as the ransom for our deliverance he was unable to hold him because of his sinlessness. How was Satan deceived? He was duped into thinking that Christ was but a higher form of angel. Satan is the fish, the humanity of Christ is the bait, and the invisible hook is Christ’s deity. Augustine actually spoke of the cross as a mouse-trap and his blood the bait!
- Second, some reject the idea of God *deceiving* Satan as unjust. Thus they retained the idea of the ransom but asserted that it was perfectly righteous. Satan is simply a fool in having overextended himself by demanding the person of Christ as a ransom, one over whom he had no power.
- Third, a view emerged that is similar to the above two but omits the idea of ransom. Here Satan is said to have the power over man due to the latter’s sin. Christ, being sinless, conquered sin, thus breaking Satan’s hold and effecting the release of mankind.
- Fourth, some argued that the conquest of Satan was entirely ethical. He was defeated in that he was unable to seduce Christ through temptation to sin. Thus he lost his power and forfeited his right to mankind.

2. *Gustaf Aulen (b. 1879)* - Gustaf Aulen, theologian at the University of Lund in Sweden, is a modern advocate of the so-called “classic” theory.

“Its central theme is the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ – Christus Victor – fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the ‘tyrants’ under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself” (4; special appeal is made to 1 John 3:8).

In effect, Aulen resurrects the patristic theory of the atonement, but modifies it by eliminating the crude imagery of Christ’s blood as a ransom to Satan. He focuses on the victorious conflict of Christ against the powers of evil. His view is thus dualistic, but in this sense:

“It is used in the sense in which the idea constantly occurs in Scripture, of the opposition between God and that which in His own created world resists His will; between the Divine love and the rebellion of created wills against Him. This Dualism is an altogether radical opposition, but it is not an absolute Dualism; for in the scriptural view evil has not an eternal existence” (5).

D. *The Theory of Recapitulation*

1. *Irenaeus (115/125 – 195-202)* - Irenaeus drew upon the terminology of Eph. 1:11 (“with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ”) for his doctrine of recapitulation. Other words he used were *restitution*, *renewal*, and *review*. The thought is similar to that in biology where an organism during its embryonic development passes through stages in which certain ancestral formations or structures are repeated. Christ is viewed as having passed through every stage of existence, from that of a small child to that of an old man (Irenaeus believed Jesus lived to the age of 50).

What Christ did was to *reverse or recapitulate the evil brought about by the fall*. His atoning work began with his birth and ended with his resurrection. During his life he renews all that was destroyed and regains all that was lost. In some sense Christ “re-thought” and “re-spoke” and “re-lived” the entire scope of human existence since the fall of Adam. He placed great stress on Jesus being the last Adam, reversing the effects incurred by the first Adam. If Adam descended, Christ ascended. Whereas infants were born in sin, Christ in holiness. Whereas in adolescence we erred, he lived in purity. The sin of the adult was dismissed by the righteousness of the man Jesus.

Emphasis is placed on the incarnation and substitutionary life of Jesus. By living and doing successfully what Adam and all his posterity failed to do in every stage of life, Christ effected our deification. His theory has thus been called the *physical theory of redemption*, in which the primary purpose of the incarnation was to re-create and re-establish man in the image of God. Deification and sanctification are given priority over the removal of guilt.

E. *The Governmental Theory*

1. *Hugo Grotius* (1583-1645) - Law, according to Grotius, is a positive statute or enactment. "It is not," he says, "something inward in God, or in the Divine will and nature, but is only the effect of his will" (iii). Law is thus a product of God's will by which not even he is bound. He may change it or abrogate it entirely as he sees fit.

As with law, the *penalty* that it carries is also a positive and not a natural or necessary component. It does not spring inevitably out of the nature of law nor from God's being, but is attached to the statute by a positive decision of God's will, which decision is mutable and optional. In other words, just as law is capable of being rescinded, so also the penal sanctions connected with it.

That all sin *deserves* punishment, Grotius would not deny. But it does not follow that all sin *must* be punished. Nothing, not even God's nature, necessitates the actual enactment of the penal sanctions of the law. God must disapprove of and condemn sin, but it does not follow that he must punish it.

When we speak of God in relationship to the world, man, and sin, Grotius insists that we view him not as an offended party, i.e., as One whose character has been violated by the transgressions of his creature. Neither are we to view God as *creditor* (Anselm) to whom the sinner now owes the debt of satisfaction and obedience. Rather, ***we are to view God as the Supreme Moral Governor of the created order, who always acts in the interests of the common good.***

Grotius then proceeds to describe God's reaction against sin not in terms of retributive justice which arises from God's character, but in terms of ***rectoral justice as related to the interests of public law and order***, by whose maintenance alone the general good can be conserved.

From the preceding considerations, Grotius contends that it is entirely feasible for God to relax the claims of his law and save the sinner apart from any satisfaction or punishment. Why, then, if there is nothing in the being or attributes of God that demands strict and exact infliction of punishment on the sinner, does not God dismiss the sinner from all obligation and save him by a mere act of will? In other words, why did Christ have to die at all?

Grotius argues that although God can remit the penalty of sin without satisfaction, as far as his own inner nature is concerned, he cannot do so in view of the welfare of the created order. God has created all things, in relation to which he now stands as Ruler and Governor. The necessities of such a moral order make it *unsafe* for him to exercise his power and right of remission of penalty.

The final cause of atonement, therefore, is *external to God*. The cause is what the interests of the universe require, not what the nature of God might demand. Christ's death is thus primarily a tribute to the sanctity of divine government. His death demonstrates that while God remits (or relaxes) the penalty, he detests sin and desires to deter its spread within the created order. A good governor cannot allow his subjects to sin with impunity, for to do so would encourage them to continue in sin. Thus Christ died as a *penal example* (but not a *penal substitute*), an exhibition of God's displeasure with sin designed to encourage us to forsake our evil ways.

The Penal Substitutionary Atonement of Christ

The death of Christ saves us from the divine punishment for our sin insofar as Jesus served as our substitute, dying in our place, and in doing so suffering in himself the judgment we deserved, satisfying or propitiating the wrath of God. Commenting on 2 Cor. 5:14-15, James Denney writes this:

“Plainly, if Paul’s conclusion is to be drawn, the ‘for’ must reach deeper than this mere suggestion of our advantage: if we all died, in that Christ died for us, there must be a sense in which that death of His is ours; He must be identified with us in it; *there, on the cross, while we stand and gaze at Him, He is not simply a person doing us a service; He is a person doing us a service by filling our place and dying our death*” (Commentary on 2 Corinthians, 194-95).

“It is a death in which the divine condemnation of sin comes upon Christ, and is exhausted there, so that there is thenceforth no more condemnation for those that are in Him” (Studies in Theology, 108).

There are several features involved in penal substitution.

(1) **Reconciliation** (2 Cor. 5:18-21)

See Rom. 5:10-11; 11:15; 2 Cor. 5:18-20; Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20,22.

1) The **objective** dimension - There are several different, but related, kinds of reconciliation:

- *John persuades Frank and Tom to give up their anger against one another. John, being a third party, reconciles the two men to each other.*
- *Tom persuades Frank to give up his anger against Tom.*
- *Frank gives up his own anger against Tom.*

But we need yet another category to describe what God has done for us.

- *At his own initiative, God removes that which is the cause of his anger against us, namely, our sin. He removes the cause of spiritual alienation by transferring his wrath against us to a proper substitute.*

Thus the objective element in reconciliation refers to the activity of God whereby his enmity or wrath against sinners is consumed by another, namely, our substitute the Lord Jesus Christ. Reconciliation, therefore, is the restoration of harmony by the removal of whatever was the cause of alienation (i.e., our sin). This reconciling work, according to 2 Corinthians 5:18-20,

- a) is wholly of God - v. 18a
- b) is a finished work - v. 18b
- c) entails the non-imputation of sin - v. 19a
- d) constitutes the message of the gospel - vv. 18c,19b

2) The **subjective** dimension - The subjective element in reconciliation refers to the fact that the activity in Christ whereby God disposed of his enmity against us must be received by faith. That is to say, we in turn, by his grace, must dispose of *our* enmity against him.

Several additional factors must be taken into account:

- a) the role of God the Father in the death of God the Son - Ps. 22:1,15; Isa. 53:4,6,10 (cf. Jn. 10:17ff.; Heb. 10:7ff. PT: the Son was *not* an *unwilling* victim)
- b) the sinlessness of God the Son - John 8:29,46; 9:16; Heb. 7:26; 1 Pt. 1:18-19; 2:22; 3:18; 1 John 3:5; Acts 3:14; 4:27-30.
- c) how was Jesus "made *to be* sin" for us?
 - First, sin may be considered in its formal nature as transgression of the law of God (1 John 3:4); i.e., sin as an *act*. In this respect we are *sinner*s.

- Second, sin may be considered as a moral quality inherent in the person who sins; i.e., the sin *principle* (Rom. 7:14-25). In this respect we are *sinful*.

In **neither** of these senses can it be said that Jesus was "made sin" for us, for he neither committed sin (and thus was not a sinner) nor possessed a nature infected by it (and thus was not sinful).

- Third, sin may also be considered in its legal aspect, principally as *guilt*; i.e., the liability to suffer the penal consequences of the law. It was in this sense, then, that Jesus was "made *to be* sin on our behalf."

d) the doctrine of imputation

Adam' sin	→	imputed to	→	us	→	original sin
our sin	→	imputed to	→	Christ	→	atonement
Christ's righteousness		imputed to	→	us	→	justification

This is the doctrine of *penal* substitutionary atonement (see Isa. 53; Gal. 3:13; Ps. 22:1-8,14-18; 1 Pt. 2:24).

(2) Propitiation (1 John 2:1-2)

On propitiation, see John Stott, *The Epistles of John* (IVP, 1988), pp. 89-93; Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 125-185; John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 29-33; Roger Nicole, "C. H. Dodd and the Doctrine of Propitiation," *Westminster Theological Journal*, May 1955, Vol. XVII, pp. 117-57. The relevant NT texts are Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:10; Hebrews 2:17.

To propitiate is to turn away wrath. The word John uses is *hilasmos*, found in only two places in the NT, both of them in 1 John (2:2; 4:10). The debate among scholars is whether the atoning sacrifice or propitiation deals only with the removal of sin (hence, "expiation") or whether it also entails the appeasement or removal of God's wrath. Murray and other conservative scholars opt for the latter:

"To propitiate means to *placate, pacify, appease, conciliate*. And it is this idea that is applied to the atonement accomplished by Christ. Propitiation presupposed the wrath and displeasure of God, and the purpose of propitiation is the removal of this displeasure. Very simply stated the doctrine of propitiation means that Christ propitiated the wrath of God and rendered God propitious to his people" (30).

(3) Redemption (Eph. 1:7ff.)

The term translated "redemption" (*apolutrosis*) occurs 10x in the NT and means release or deliverance from a state of slavery by the payment of a ransom. See Mt. 20:28. The OT background for this concept is found in God's "redemption" or "deliverance" of Israel from Egypt (see Ex. 21:8; Lev. 25:48; Dt. 7:8; 9:26; 13:5; 15:15). Redemption is actually three-fold: *past* (at the time of Christ's death; Heb. 9:12,15); *present* (in the sense that it is a possession we now have; this is the emphasis of Eph. 1:7; see also Rom. 3:24; 1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 1:14); and *future* (final deliverance = glorification of the body; Rom. 8:23; Eph. 1:14; 4:30).

The means by which we are redeemed from the slavery of sin is "the blood of Christ". **Redemption is not the product of divine fiat**. God cannot simply "will" redemption into being. It is possible only via a substitutionary sacrifice, an atoning ransom that propitiates the righteous wrath of God. See esp. 1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23 for emphasis on the purchase "price".

Here (in v. 7c) "the forgiveness of sins" stands in apposition to redemption, i.e., redemption = forgiveness of sins. The latter concept is rare in Paul but frequent in Acts (Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18). To be forgiven means to be released from legal liability to endure the punishment that sin and its guilt require.

Discussion Questions

- (1) First define the moral influence theory of the atonement, as well as the example theory and the governmental theory. Why are these inadequate to account for what Christ did on the cross? Why would these theories fall short of explaining how the death of Jesus saves us?
- (2) In what sense is the Classical theory of the atonement (as articulated by Gustaf Aulen) true and biblical? In what sense does it fall short of a full accounting of what Christ accomplished?
- (3) What are some of the objections you might hear to the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement? How would you respond to them?
- (4) Define propitiation? Why is it important or essential to our understanding of Christ's death?
- (5) What biblical texts most explicitly articulate penal substitution?