The Doctrine of the Atonement

Introduction

Christianity is all about Christ, and the crucial fact about Christ is his passion on the cross. Scripture portrays the Saviors death as the basis of every spiritual blessing (Rom 8:31-32) as the source of true Christian living (Rom 6:1-11) and as the foundation of the church’s life and witness (Rom 6:1-4; 1 Cor 11:26). All Christian have affirmed that Christ died on the cross, but when we say that “Christ died for us,” what do we mean?

Historical Interpretations of Atonement

Throughout the history of the Church there have been a number of theories of the atonement that have been proposed. Let’s have a look at the major theories.

The Classic or Ransom Theory (Many Church Fathers & Aulen) – Christus Victor

Many patristic authorities to the Anselm and a few contemporary theologians interpreted the Atonement as a cosmic victory over sin, death, and Satan. This classic, dramatic, or ransom theory, which depicts God triumphing over enslaving spiritual forces, was the dominant church view for 1,000 years.

Strengths of the View

- The Bible does teach that all people are under the bondage of Satan.
- Many NT passages do suggest that the through the cross a cosmic victory was won over Sin, Satan and death. For example 2:13 – “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”
- The Bible does teach use the language of ransom. Mark 10:45 – “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Weaknesses of the View

- Many early theologians went so far as to say that at the cross God paid a ransom to Satan, thus rescuing the human race. For example Origen (d. 254) said that in “exchange for the freedom of souls held under his sway, Satan demanded the blood of Christ.” However, this theory presents a cosmic dualism that undermines the power of God in that he is under obligation to Satan. Further, while the Bible uses the language of ‘ransom’ it is not clear to whom that ransom is made. Demarest simply points out, “Ransom simply conveys the truth that it cost God dearly to free

---

1 Quoted in Demarest, pg 150.
sinners from spiritual enslavement.” And further he goes on to say (speaking about Paul's use of ransom language), “The question, to whom was the price paid? Goes beyond the main point Paul sought to make.”

- Further, it minimizes the role of forgiveness by teaching that God does not need to forgive, but to rescue.

**The Satisfaction or Juridical Theory (Anselm)**

Anselm was one of the chief theologians of the medieval scholastic period. He was the theologian who first came up with the classic arguments for God (Cosmological, Moral etc...). Anselm taught that Man’s sinfulness has wounded God’s honour. God, out of necessity, restored his honour by sending Christ, both God and man, who restored His honour and gained a reward that He did not need, since He had everything. This reward is offered to man in the form of merit and grace.

**Strengths**
- It places the focus upon God, not Satan. Rather than Satan as the one to whom the ransom had to be paid Anselm viewed that man had sinned against God.
- Further, it takes sin seriously. Sin is against God and his honour.

**Weaknesses**
- It makes the atonement necessary, not only for us and our salvation, but for God and His honour.
- Focus is unduly placed on God’s offended honour rather than on His breached righteousness.
- Later, Roman Catholic thought picked up this theory of atonement and developed a full system of penance and merit.

---

2 Demarest, 176.
3 Ibid.
**Moral Influence Theory**

Proponents claim that Christ’s death accomplished nothing objective; there were no obstacles in God that needed to be overcome in order for sinners to be restored to fellowship with their Creator. The sole barrier to salvation lies in estranged person themselves, i.e. in their ignorant minds and proud wills. This theory maintains that God’s love displayed on the cross overwhelms sinners’ resistance and persuades them to repent and be reconciled to God.

**Strengths**

- The life and death of Christ is a motivating factor in our lives. We are drawn to Christ by seeing his love for us on the cross.
- We are all to follow Christ in carrying our own cross (Matthew 10:38). The cross is an example for us to follow.

**Weaknesses**

- It undermines the seriousness of sin and elevates God’s love at the expense of His righteousness.
- It disregards all imagery of a necessary sacrifice. The Bible teaches that forgiveness is based upon punishment, not baseless benevolence (Hebrews 9:22).
- The reason the cross of Christ is such a great expression of the love is precisely because it has some objective value. The suffering of Christ was not just physical, but was also spiritual as he bore the punishment for the sins of the world.

**The Governmental Theory**

Main proponent Grotius argued that Christ did not bear the full penalty of human sin, nor did he propitiate the divine wrath. Grotius maintained the objectively Christ by his death made a token, rather than a full or equivalent, payment to God for human sins. Through the death of his Son, God upheld the moral governance of the universe while setting aside the requirement of the law that sinners must be punished.
**Main Points**

- God could have relaxed His moral law and forgiven sinners, but then this would have caused moral anarchy.
- God chose to demonstrate His moral government by punishing Christ for sin.
- Christ could not have paid the exact penalty for our sins since He is not eternally punished in Hell.
- If Christ completely paid for the sins of man, then all people are forgiven and will go to heaven. God would have no right to demand faith and obedience, since all are objectively forgiven.

**Strengths**

- Seeks to uphold God’s moral law.

**Weaknesses**

- Makes the atonement optional; God could have accomplished it another way.
- This is not an actual substitution since only a token penalty was paid.

**Penal Substitution Theory**

According to this view sin, which is primarily a violation of God’s law, not his honor, results in the just penalty of death. But in love Jesus Christ, our substitute, in his life perfectly fulfilled the law and in death bore the just penalty for our sins. On the cross Christ took our place and bore the equivalent punishment for our sins, thereby satisfying the just demands of the law and appeasing God’s wrath. As repentant sinners appropriate Christ’s vicarious sacrifice by faith, God forgives sins, imputes Christ’s righteousness, and reconciles the estranged to himself.

**Strengths**

- It takes God’s righteousness seriously.
- It shows the severity and necessity of the atonement.
- It has the most biblical support.
- The strengths of the other positions can be brought together and rightly understood under substitutionary atonement.

**Weakness**

- Sometimes in emphasizing substitution some evangelicals forget to celebrate the many contours of the cross that are present within that Scriptures and therefore miss out on the richness of the cross for their worship and sanctification.
Major Thesis

Substitutionary Atonement is the central atonement motif of the Bible, but through this motif the other contours of the Cross come to us.

The Heart of Substitutionary Atonement

Substitutionary atonement rests on four concepts.

1) **Sin results in death:** Man is sinful and has broken God’s law incurring the penalty of death.
2) **God requires justice:** The breaking of the law results in the wrath of God towards humanity and that wrath needs to be satisfied.
3) **In our place:** Christ substitutes himself and dies in our place taking on himself the wrath of God and dying the death we should have died.
4) **Imputation:** A great exchange occurs on the cross. Our sin is placed on Christ and his righteous is imputed to us, so that we are forgiven.
The Biblical Support for Substitutionary Atonement

It is my contention that these concepts are found all the way throughout the Bible and that Substitutionary Atonement is the most biblical theory of Atonement.

A. The Substitutionary Atonement of Christ was prefigured in the sacrifices of OT.

1. Dispensation of Innocence: Cain and Abel first mention of sacrifice. Cain’s sacrifice was acceptable to God; we read that “the Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering.”

2. Dispensation of Conscience: Noah sacrificed burnt offerings to God for deliverance from the deluge (Gen 8:20).

3. Dispensation of Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had altars where they offered sacrifices. Abraham’s near slaying of Isaac as a burnt offering in the region of Moriah prefigured the substitutionary death of the Messiah two millennia later. Isaac ascended the mountain bearing the wood upon which the sacrifice would be laid. When he inquired about the lamb for the burnt offering, Abraham responded, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son” (v.8). As Abraham was about to slay his son on the altar, the angel of the Lord showed him a ram caught in a thicket. Abraham then “took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.” (22:13). The phrase, “instead of his son” affirms the substitutionary nature of the animal sacrifice.

4. Dispensation of the Law: Passover main sacrifice – this atoning sacrifice resulted in Israel’s deliverance from the land of bondage (Ex 14). We may say that the blood of the Passover sacrifice had a certain atoning power and anticipated the blood of the Lamb shed on Calvary that would remove sins and avert the divine wrath (Jn 1:29; Rom 3:25; Heb 2:17). The Levitical sacrifices had also the idea of Atonement in them; the worshiper would place their hand on the sacrifice to signify their deification with the sacrifice. The Day of Atonement also depicts substitution, for it shows the holiness of God, the gravity of sin, and God’s gracious provision by vicarious sacrifice. Important in OT times atonement was wrought not on the basis of a person’s best works but solely through God’s free grace and mercy. Ot people who practiced the prescribed sacrifices and offerings in repentance and faith toward God were saved by the yet future work of Christ prefigured by those rites (Rom 3:25). Thus the faithful OT worshiper received pardon of sins – yet a remission that was less than permanent – and they experienced genuine fellowship with God – yet

In Leon Morris’ book the Apostolic Preaching of the cross, he points out that there are a number of lambs mentioned in Scripture. 1) Passover over lamb 2) The lamb that is led to slaughter 3) The suffering servant 4) the daily sacrifice 5) The gentle lamb (Jer 11:19) 6) The scapegoat 7) The triumphant lamb of the revelation 8) The Lamb that God provides.
B. Substitutionary Atonement was predicted in the OT prophets

The prophets vividly portrayed the passion of the future “servant” and “branch.”

- **Ps 22:** Although it speaks directly of David’s trials, the poet’s vision transcends the present to embrace the Messiah’s future passion. It portrays the Messiah’s God forsakenness verse 1 (My God My God why has thou forsaken me, Matt 27:46), 7-8 portray the insults hurled at Christ at Calvary (Matt 27:39) and 14-15 his physical suffering and 18 the dividing of his garments.

- **Zechariah:** He acted out a drama which depicted the sale of the Good Shepherd for a mere thirty pieces of silver. (Zech 11:12-13)

- **Isaiah:** He predicted –
  1) The terrible physical and emotional pain the Messiah neither registered nor shrank back from (Isa 50:5).
  2) The maltreatment by the people and his patient endurance of sufferings (Isa 53:6-7) and disfigured appearance (Isa 52:14).
  3) Numbered among criminals (Isa 53:12) given an unfair trial and his life were cut off by a violent death (Isa 53:8).
  4) Describes the substitution of the atonement in fourth servant song. (Isa 52:13-53:12) “He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.” “He was wounded for our transgressions and he was crushed for our iniquities.”

- **Daniel:** Daniel 9:24 “To finish transgression, to put as end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness.”

- **Conclusion:** The prophets predicted the passion of the Christ and made it clear it was on our behalf.

C. Substitutionary Atonement in the NT.

1. **In the Gospels:** In the life of Christ his whole life was a sacrifice to God. By fulfilling the law, Christ was righteous and able to atone for our sins and impute his righteousness to our account. Mark 10:45 “But the man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for (anti) many.” Use of anti preposition which means “instead of.” Further the Lord’s Supper reveals the substitution of Christ, Lk 22:19 “This is my body given for (hyper – on behalf of) of you.” Thereafter the Lord took the cup of the wine, gave thanks, and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” Once again the Greek
preposition “hyper” in these texts means “on behalf of” or “in place of” and so connotes both representation and substitution.

2. In the Pauline Corpus: In Paul’s writings we have the clearest teaching on substitutionary atonement.
   - 1 Cor 15:3 “Christ died for (hyper – on behalf of) our sins.”
   - “Christ, our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed” (1Cor 5:7).
   - “God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us.” (2 Cor 5:21)
   - “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, by becoming a curse for (hyper – in behalf of) us.” (Gal 3:13)
   - Further, Paul states in many places that Christ, “gave himself for our sins.” (Gal 1:4 cf. Rom 5:6, 8; 8:32; Gal 2:20; Tit 2:14; Eph 5:2).

3. In Johannine Literature: “Look the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29)”. The sacrificial Lamb from OT is in view here, in a substitution sense.

4. In Peter’s writings: Picking up the servant idea of Isa 53, Peter upheld Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice by writing “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree and “by his wounds you have been healed.” (1 Peter 2:24)

Conclusion: The New Testament teaches that Christ died in our place, as our substitute for our sins. Picking up the ideas presented by Isaiah the gospels and epistles apply them to Christ. This is the major motif for the atonement in the whole Bible.

The different contours of the Cross

However, while substitutionary atonement is at the heart of the cross, there are other themes that spring forth. So rather, then the cross being in black and white the cross is in full color HD.

1) Ransom – Mark 10:45. ‘Ransom’ was widely used in classical Greek to denote the payment made to free a slave or prisoner. Theologically, the metaphor connotes that Jesus’ death possesses an atoning dimension because it wipes out guilt and a liberating dimension in that it sets spiritual captives free from sin and Satan. Jesus’ saying does not state to whom the payment is made. Ransom simply conveys the truth that it cost God dearly to free sinners from spiritual enslavement.

2) Redemption – a. Meaning. (1) To pay the ransom price (1 Peter 2:1) (2) To remove from the marketplace (slave market, Greek of Gal. 3:13) (3) To effect a full release (Matt 20:28). b. Benefits. Sin paid for and the sinner released from all the consequences of sin.


4) Justification – The word justify means to “declare righteous.” In the courtroom of heaven, when a person repents of their sin and declares their faith in Christ that
person is justified. Their sin is imputed to Christ, and Christ’s righteousness is imputed to them and they are declared “not guilty.”

5) **Expiation** – We contend that propitiation is needed, not expiation however, in the OT this concept is present. The Lord says, “I will cleanse them from all sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me.”

6) **Reconciliation** – a. Meaning. Man’s state of alienation from God is changed so that he is able to be saved (2 Cor 5:19). b. Need for reconciliation – man’s enmity (Rom 5:10).

7) **Cosmic Victory** – Through the death of Christ death, the devil, the law and the sin have been defeated. (2 Tim 1:10; 1 Cor 15:55-57; Col 2:15).

8) **Moral Influence/Example** – Paul and Peter viewed the Death of Christ as a powerful example of Christian conduct.

9) **Partakers of the New Covenant** – Whereas a believer was once united with Adam and under the covenant of works, he is now a partaker of the new covenant in Christ.

**Note the following Chart:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Need in Person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jesus is our Victor</td>
<td>Col 2:13-15</td>
<td>Through the cross Christ defeats sin, death and the devil</td>
<td>Spiritual defeat due to temptation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus is our Redeemer</td>
<td>Titus 2:13-14</td>
<td>Through the cross Christ liberates us from the oppression of sin, death and the devil. Just like the Israelites were liberated from the bondage in Egypt.</td>
<td>The slavery and imprisonment that sin, death and the devil brings into our lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus is our Propitiation</td>
<td>1 Jn 4:10; Rom 8:1</td>
<td>Through the cross Christ satisfies the wrath of God so that we are no longer condemned by God but at peace with him.</td>
<td>People can feel like God hates them. However, this great truth reminds us that he no longer condemns us and through Christ is at peace with us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus is our Expiation</td>
<td>1 Jn 1:9</td>
<td>Through the cross Christ cleanses us from the stain of Sin on our soul so we are no longer live in guilt and shame.</td>
<td>People can feel unclean due to sin and this truth reminds them that God has cleansed them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus is our justification</td>
<td>Rom 5:1</td>
<td>Through the cross a great exchange occurs our sin is placed on Christ and his righteousness is imputed to us.</td>
<td>Many people walk around feeling very guilty before God. Even though they know that they have been forgiven, they don’t feel it. It is great to know that through Christ, our actual guilt have been forgiven and we are right with God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus is our Ransom</td>
<td>1 Tim 2:5-6</td>
<td>Through the Cross Christ paid our penalty so that we are no longer going to hell.</td>
<td>People need to know that God truly does love them and that they are no longer headed for hell.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus is our example</td>
<td>1 Peter 2:21</td>
<td>Through the Cross Christ demonstrates the ultimate example of obedience to the will of God and shows us how through suffering God’s will can be accomplished.</td>
<td>People need an example of an obedient Spirit filled life. Especially, an example of how to suffer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus is our Reconciliation</td>
<td>2 Cor 5:18</td>
<td>We are no longer enemies of God through the Cross Christ has taken away all the problems.</td>
<td>People need to know that God no longer hates them but is at peace with them through Christ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus is our Reveal er of God</td>
<td>Jn 1:18</td>
<td>Jesus reveals what God is like in that he was willing to die for the sake of others.</td>
<td>People need a dramatic picture of God and they see it most in Christ on the cross.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus brings us into a new covenantal relationship with God</td>
<td>1 Cor 11:25</td>
<td>Through the work of Christ we enter into a new covenant with God.</td>
<td>All people are already in a covenantal arrangement with God. All unbelievers are under the covenant God made with Adam and Eve in the Garden. They are “in” Adam. But if you have trusted in Christ, you are now in a new relationship with God.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Application: How does this apply?**

1. **For Counseling and Discipleship**
   - “Demon’s are tormenting me” – Kate.
   - “My Wife has a brain tumor” – Rick.
   - “I think I am going to hell, how can I know that I am going to heaven” – Lisa.
   - “I just can’t seem to stop looking at pornography” – Ryan.
   - “How do I know that God loves me?” – question from a Sunday school kid.
   - “I have done some pretty bad things in my past and I feel so dirty inside.” – Monica
   - “I know God has forgiven me, but I feel guilty all the time.” – Jason
• “God must hate me for all that I have done this week.” – Luke

2. **Leading Communion and Worship**

3. **Preaching and Teaching**

   For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but *we preach Christ crucified*, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,
   (1 Corinthians 1:22-23 ESV)

   For I decided to know nothing among you *except Jesus Christ and him crucified*.
   (1 Corinthians 2:2 ESV)

• How do we preach Christ and him crucified in every sermon?

• How do I take Joshua 1 and preach Christ and him crucified?

**Great Books on the Cross every Christian should read**


*Death by Love by Mark Driscoll* – A great book where he takes all the different aspects of the cross and applies them to people in his congregation.