

Various Theories of the Atonement

Part I

1. The word '*atonement*' is of Anglo-Saxon origin and means "*a making at one.*" It points to a process of bringing those who are estranged into a unity.
2. Its theological use is to denote the work of Christ in dealing with the problem that has been posed by the sin of man, and bringing sinners into a right relationship with God. Sin is serious and man is unable to deal with it (I Kings 8:46; Psalm 14:3; Mark 10:18; Romans 3:23). Sin separates man from God (Isaiah 59:2; Proverbs 15:29; Colossians 1:21; Hebrews 10:27). Man cannot keep it (sin) hidden (Numbers 32:23). The most important evidence of this is the very fact of the atonement. "*If the Son of God came to earth to save men, then men were sinners and their plight serious indeed*" (Morris).
3. Although the meaning and effects of the atonement are known, throughout Church history many theories have arisen as to the precise nature of how the atonement was performed, the work and nature of the Godhead, and man's response.
4. Essentially there are three categories of theories exist emphasizing
 - the bearing of penalty,
 - the outpouring of love
 - and the triumph of Christ's victory.

"These are not mutually exclusive, though some have held that the truth is contained in one of them" (Morris).

5. The various theories tend to respond to the needs and climate of the time.
6. The Ransom Theory. The notion that it was the devil who made the cross necessary was widespread in the early Church. Origen of the Alexandrian School, however, introduced a new idea; namely that Satan was deceived in the transaction. "*Christ offered Himself as a ransom to Satan, and Satan accepted the ransom without realizing that he would not be able to retain his hold on Christ because of the latter's divine power and holiness. . . Thus the souls of all men - even of those in hades - were set free from the power of Satan*" (Louis Berkoff).
7. Gregory of Nyssa repeated this idea, and justified the deceit on two grounds - namely that the deceiver received his "*due*" when deceived in turn, and that Satan benefits by it in the end anyway, as it results in his own salvation.
8. In his Great Catechism he used the vivid imagery of a fish hook as with ravenous fish, the hook of the Deity might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh, and thus, life being introduced into the house of death, . . . [the devil] might vanish".

9. Augustine later used an image of a mousetrap, as did Peter Lombard "*baited with the blood of Christ*".
10. R. W. Dale labeled these "*intolerable, monstrous and profane*".
11. The idea of a ransom paid to Satan was repudiated with scorn and indignation by Gregory of Nazianzus as well as the idea that God requires a ransom. Jesus and the apostles certainly did speak of the cross as the means of the devil's overthrow but there are some concerns.
12. First, the devil has been credited with more power than he has. Although a robber and a rebel, the view implies he had acquired certain 'rights' over man which even God was bound to.
13. Second, the cross was seen as a divine transaction - the ransom-price demanded by the devil for the release of his captives.
14. Third, the concept of God performing a deception is not at all harmonious with the revelation of God given in Scriptures.
15. Anselm of Canterbury and the Satisfaction Theory. Athanasius and Ambrose both referred to Christ as having borne that which one themselves deserves to bear, but "the emergence of the view as a full-fledged theory of the way atonement works is usually traced to Anselm, the great eleventh-century Archbishop of Canterbury" in his work *Cur Deus Homo*.
16. Instead of God owing to the devil, Anselm's argument was that man owed something to God.
17. Anselm saw sin as not rendering to God what is His due, namely the submission of one's entire will to His.
18. Hence, to sin is to dishonor Him. To imagine that God could simply forgive us in the same we forgive others, is to have not considered the seriousness of sin.
19. Anselm continues, "*nothing is less tolerable. . . than that the creature should take away from the Creator the honor due to Him, and not repay what he takes away*". He thus sees that the sinner must repay God, but more so it is impossible for God to overlook this, for He "*upholds nothing more justly than he doth the honor of his own dignity*".
20. However, man is incapable of ever repaying that which is owed.
21. Present obedience and good works cannot make satisfaction either, for these are required anyway.
22. However, Anselm explains that there is a possible solution to the human dilemma.
23. No one can make the satisfaction but God Himself, but no one ought to do it but man.

24. Hence, it is necessary, he said, that a God-man should make satisfaction.
25. For this reason, Christ became man - to die. Not as a debt, as He was sinless, but freely for the honor of God.
26. Hence, by his voluntary self-offering, the death of the God-man Christ has made due reparation to the offended honor of God.
27. Anselm's is to be commended for his clear perception of the gravity of sin as a willful rebellion against God, the unchanging holiness of God, and the unique perfection of Christ.
28. However, there other problems.
29. God is portrayed in terms reminiscent of a feudal overlord (Anselm having written in a feudal society) who demands honor and punishes dishonor. One must question whether this picture adequately expresses the specific honor that is due to God alone.
30. We must certainly remain dissatisfied whenever the atonement is presented as a necessary satisfaction of God's 'law' or of God's 'honor' in so far as these are objectified as existing in some way apart from Him.
31. Peter Abelard and the Moral-Influence Theory. Born in 1097, Peter Abelard of Brittany advanced a theory where he insisted that it is the love of God that avails.
32. More specifically, To the showing of his justice - that is, his love - which, as has been said, justifies us in his sight.
33. In other words, to show forth his love to us, or to convince us how much we ought to love him who spared not even his own Son for us. . . *Now it seems to us that we have been justified by the blood of Christ and reconciled to God in this way: through this unique act of grace manifested to us. . . he has more fully bound us to himself by love; with the result that our hearts should be enkindled by such a gift of divine grace, and true charity should not now shrink from enduring anything for him.*
34. Abelard does not specifically say that the cross does no more than show God's love but often his theory has been expanded in that way.
35. Nevertheless, his view has no objective effect - it does not pay a penalty or win a victory other than symbolically.
36. Rather, the death of Christ shows us the greatness of God's love and moves us to love in return, and by extension, our fellow man.
37. The atonement avails in the effect it has on us, not in anything that has been accomplished outside of us.

38. Unfortunately this explanation is lacking.
39. Does not sin against God entail guilt before Him?
40. Can God's justice be met simply by a rekindling of love in the sinner?
41. Can the righteousness and love of God really be equated in this way?
42. Abelard fails to take fully into account God's holiness as well as Biblical statements to the effect that Christ's death accomplished a work of propitiation (such as Romans 3:25-26).
43. Any view of the cross which does not attribute an accomplishment to the cross to be lacking. In Abelard's case, why should Jesus have died at all? Man needed an act of revelation, but not an act of atonement.
44. The Governmental Theory. The governmental theory was conceived by Hugo Grotius, a 17th century Dutch jurist, statesman and theologian.
45. He viewed God as a lawgiver who both enacted and sustained law in the universe. In fact, law is the result of God's will, and He is free to alter or abrogate it.
46. As God's law states "*the soul that sins shall die*" strict justice requires the eternal death of sinners.
47. Simply forgiving could not uphold the law.
48. The death of Christ, then, was a public example of the depth of sin and the lengths to which God would go to uphold the moral order of the universe.
49. The effects of His death do not directly bear on us, as Christ did not die in our place, but rather on our behalf.
50. The focus was not saving sinners but upholding the law.
51. This view fails to recognize the substitutionary theme in Christ's death as revealed in Matthew 20:28, 26:28; John 10:14-15; II Corinthians 5:21 and Ephesians 5:25.
52. The theory fails to explain the reason for choosing a sinless person to demonstrate God's desire to uphold the law. Why not put to death the worst of all sinners? Why Christ and not Barabbas?
53. Finally, this theory does not take into account the depravity of mankind - like Abelard, Grotius assumes a mere example will be sufficient to enable man to perform a law-abiding way of living.

54. The Penal-Substitution Theory. A modern evangelical view is the penal-substitution theory that states that Christ bore in our place the full penalty of sin that was due to mankind.
55. He suffered in man's place and His death was vicarious, totally for others.
56. This view takes seriously the Scriptural depiction of God's holiness and righteousness, finding expression in His judicial wrath.
57. It takes seriously the Biblical description of man's depravity and inability to save oneself. It takes literally the statements that Christ died in man's place (Exodus 13:1-16; Leviticus 16:20-22; Isaiah 53:4-12; Mark 10:45; John 3:17; Galatians 3:13 etc).
58. Conclusion. A brief number of theories of the atonement have been given. There are many more and, no doubt, these will not be the last.
59. Many of the theories of the atonement that have been developed contain serious flaws such as attributing fraudulent behavior to God.
60. However, what is of permanent value in these theories is that they took seriously the reality and power of the devil and that they proclaimed His decisive defeat at the cross for our liberation.
61. Each of the theories has made a particular appeal to people in a particular age . . . Our theories are of value in that they draw attention to particular aspects of Christ's saving work.
62. Each of the theories draws attention to something that is true, and not only true but also valuable.
63. We need the insight that the atonement is a victory over evil, we need the insight that it is the payment of our penalty, and we need the insight that it is the outpouring of love that inspires us to love in return.
64. The atonement is all of these. We neglect any of them to our impoverishment.

Various Theories of the Atonement

Part II

The Moral Influence Theory

1. This theory denies that Christ died to satisfy any principle of divine justice, but teaches instead that His death was designed to greatly impress mankind with a sense of God's love, resulting in softening their hearts and leading them to repentance.
2. Thus, the Atonement is not directed "towards God with the purpose of maintaining His justice, but towards man with the purpose of persuading him to right action."
3. Christ's suffering and death was that of a mere martyr. Inspired by this example we, too, are supposed to be made willing to take up our crosses daily in the service of some good cause to mankind, and thus work out our own salvation.
4. The Atonement this theory teaches is only an influence to persuade and move us to walk in the same paths that Christ walked.
5. It is our walking in these paths which saves us and not the Christ of the cross. Christ is thus not our Savior, but only a friend.

Response

The Bible indeed teaches that God is love (1 John 4:8), but this does not mean that love is God. Love is one of many attributes of God, but there are others.

The being of God is best described in John 4:24, "God is Spirit."

If God were love and nothing but love, there would have been no need for an Atonement.

But, the fact is, that love is only one of many attributes of God; He is also a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29), and Christ said, "*I am the way, the Truth and the Life.*"

Certainly then He did not mean that He was a living tangible entity which was called "truth," or "way," or "life," and neither does He mean that He is "love."

No, love is not God, but only the very essence of His being.

Further, to ascribe one attribute as superior over another is to create an imbalanced God. God is perfectly balanced in His attributes.

He is no more Love than He is Holy; no more Holy than He is Just, and no more Just than He is Righteous.

For one to declare God to be love, and only love, or to say that the dominating characteristic of God is love, is to be guilty of presenting God with a warped nature.

The love of God can be viewed from two different perspectives; that of God's love of benevolence, and that of God's love of acquiescence.

The love of benevolence is toward all mankind. As it is written, "...for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45).

The love of benevolence is toward all mankind in general.

The love of acquiescence, however, is a special love of delight, which is manifest towards God's children only. *"No man can come to me except the Father which hath sent me draw him"* (John 8:44).

Those whom the Father draws to Christ are those in whom God delights, for He gives unto them eternal life. Surely God does not love Judas Iscariot who "went to his own place;" surely He does not love the multitudes who are at this very moment weeping and wailing and gnashing their teeth in a burning hell, where they will forever more be the objects of God's wrath and anger!

If this, my friend, is love, it is a most peculiar way of demonstrating it.

The truth is that God demands punishment of sin.

His divine justice must be satisfied, His holiness must be vindicated, and His law must be honored.

The Lord Jesus Christ suffered the exact degree of torment that every child of God would have experienced in hell for all eternity, worlds without end.

Christ was more than an example, more than a mere martyr; He is salvation and there is no way to escape the judgment of God except through Him; *"No man cometh unto the Father, but by me"* (John 14:6).

This theory completely denies

the spiritual condition of man (Ephesians 2:1; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3:9-23),
the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ (John 10:30; 5:18; 8:58; Revelation 1:8, 11),
and "necessitates a curtailment or surrender of every other characteristic doctrine of Christianity-
inspiration, sin, the deity of Christ, justification, regeneration and eternal retribution."

The Governmental Theory

The second of the theories this writer will discuss is known as the Governmental theory.

It affirms that *"because of His absolute sovereignty, God is able to relax, at will, the demands of the law and to forgive men freely without any expiation or sacrifice for sin."*

According to this theory the primary purpose of the crucifixion was to impress upon men the horror of sin.

Christ was to furnish an example of what happened as the result of sin, and to remind men that sin would not go unpunished.

The primary object of the punishment of Christ is to instill devotion in men toward their government.

Christ did not suffer the exact penalty demanded of God, but something far less. God, however, in His sovereignty, can and did accept the sacrifice as sufficient whether it actually was or not.

Response

First of all, this theory represents God as unjust because it teaches that He punished an innocent person-merely to impress others.

Second, if what this theory assumes is true, that is, that God can accept a much lesser sacrifice than that which sin demands, then the blood of animals could have been used to remove sin; therefore, the blood of the Son of God was in reality no more meritorious than the blood of bulls and goats, but was efficacious only because God chose to accept it.

Third, this theory presents a light view of sin and its effects upon mankind in that it teaches that man possesses the power in and of himself to change his moral nature. All he needs in order to accomplish this is to surround himself with good influences.

The faulty reasoning of such a theory can be better understood when one considers the individual who conceived it.

Hugo Grotius, a Dutch theologian and jurist of the 17th century proposed it.

It was Mr. Grotius' opinion that God be regarded as the moral Governor of the universe "*who must act not according to His emotions or desires, but according to the best interest of all those under His authority.*"

The Mystical Theory

According to those who hold the Mystical theory, the entire human race is a sort of organism.

Mankind is collectively one and is joined together as the cells of protoplasm combine to form a human body.

What Christ actually did when incarnated was to infuse His deity into humanity, thus giving humanity the thing needed to counteract and overcome the death and impending corruption which were introduced into the human race through Adam.

Men who are saved by faith become partakers of this purified humanity. According to some who assert the mystical theory, fallen humanity was gradually restored by Jesus Christ until, at His death, humanity was again in perfect fellowship with God as it was before the fall in Eden.

It is the teaching of this theory that ultimately the entire human race will be restored unto God. Although the Mystical theory has been in existence since the early Greek fathers, it has never claimed many adherents.

Response

This theory errs in several points.

First, in that it asserts that the sufferings of Christ and His ultimate death are not essential to His redemptive work.

Second, because it affirms that all men since Christ will be saved, it leaves unexplained the redemption of the Old Testament saints. This explains why some who adhere to this theory teach that there was no salvation before the time of Christ, and therefore the patriarchs perished.

Third, the theory lacks scriptural warrant in proving that Christ became incarnate in order to infuse deity into humanity. The Bible makes no such declaration.

The Middle Theory

Commonly called the Middle theory because it generally follows the "Socinian" theory.

It teaches that God may forgive and pardon sin apart from punishment of that sin; that is, He requires no satisfaction, or Atonement.

The Middle theory implies that there are persons who have never sinned. These persons will receive pardon upon the basis of repentance only, but they will never receive full pardon.

However, what they do receive is sufficient to allow them to escape eternal damnation.

Response

The Middle theory of the Atonement does not explain sufficiently why Christ suffered such severe punishment upon the cross.

If God requires no Atonement, then why did Christ suffer?

As such, this theory not only presents a warped view of the divine character of Christ, but it does not explain scripture which refers to the work of Christ.

If there are persons who have never sinned, how shall they repent and what shall they repent of?

In order for repentance to be true repentance, one must turn from sin and to Christ.

However, if an individual has never sinned he cannot repent for he has nothing to repent of.

The Socinian Theory

This theory affirms that God is pure benevolence, that His exercising His wrath in justice is incompatible with His character, and that a sinner may be forgiven upon repentance.

The work which Christ wrought only made pardon known to man, but did not actually secure it.

The pardon of sinners was already prepared in God's benevolent nature; all Christ did was to make it known.

The sacrifices in the Old Testament were suitable only to a barbarous age and did not typify the Atonement of Christ by any stretch of the imagination. God, because of sympathy for the weakness of the people, permitted such sacrifices.

Response

This theory, needless to say, is not in harmony with the Bible's description of the nature of sin and is at variance with the teachings of scripture concerning Christ's reward pending the completion of His meritorious work.

Instead of Christ's active and passive obedience being the ground and price paid for the sinner's salvation, the Socinian theory asserts that Christ's life and death were only examples to us of the manner in which we should live and submit to God.

Finally, the Bible definitely teaches that the Old Testament ceremonies and sacrifices were types and illustrations of the things to come (Hebrews 10:1; Colossians 2:17).

The Ethical Theory

According to advocates of this theory, Christ is a universal mediator, who is touched with sympathy for the sick, weary, guilty and hopeless.

In the work of the Atonement, there is no imputation or transfer of sin to Christ; neither is His righteousness imputed to all born-again believers. What does happen, is that the race approaches God representatively suffering for sin and repenting through Christ.

While man cannot repent in and of himself, still the Atonement of Jesus Christ has no value apart from repentance.

In order for God to be just, He must reveal Himself to every sinner. According to the Ethical theory, *"The Gospel is preached to a nation, not when within certain geographical boundaries it has been proclaimed at scattered points, but only when in reality all individuals of all the nations have known it."*

Each one who is saved must receive salvation through the knowledge, motive and power of the Gospel.

Response

A clarification of terms is in order.

A mediator is not one who reveals another, but one who intervenes between two persons to bring them into agreement.

The Bible declares, *"By His stripes we are healed,"* but this theory sets forth nothing in the sufferings of Christ from which God can justly pardon and accept the sinner.

If our sins are not imputed to Christ nor His righteousness to us, then is Christ dead in vain (Galatians 2:21).

This theory errs in that it presents repentance as an effective cause and not as a consequence of the Atonement.

Therefore, it sets forth salvation as partly by grace and partly by works.

The Ethical Theory is also faulty in that it fails to answer the question of how infants receive salvation, because it holds that regeneration never occurs except through *"the knowledge, motive and power of the Gospel."*

The Arminian Theory

Christ died so that God could offer salvation to all upon the ground of evangelical obedience; perfect legal obedience is not necessary.

The Atonement itself was general in its nature without any application of it on God's part.

Any individual may accept or reject faith and obedience, thus accepting or rejecting salvation as offered by God by a simple act of volition.

Response

This theory, like many others, fails to provide a satisfaction or appeasement to divine justice and law.

It also presents the possibility of failure in that some for whom Christ died may ultimately end up in hell. Scripture is totally against such claims as Christ said, *"All that the Father giveth me shall come to me ... I give unto them eternal life, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand; My Father which gave them me is greater than all; no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand"* (John 6:37; 10:27-29).

Such scriptures as these plainly teach that the Atonement was not to secure the means of salvation, but to procure salvation itself.

The Lutheran Theory

This theory differs basically in one aspect from the generally accepted "Satisfaction" view of the Atonement. Namely, in that it teaches such was the value of Christ's sacrifice that God could offer salvation to all that believe in His Son.

Response

The Lutheran theory rejects the doctrine of election thus omitting a part of the truth.

Even though salvation is not election, election is included in God's all wise and sovereign purpose, *"For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate ... Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth"* (Romans 8:29,33).

The question for those who proclaim the Lutheran theory is not *"did Christ die for only those who truly believe?"* but *"Who shall believe?"*

According to scripture, those whom God foreknew were predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29).

It is impossible for one to become like Christ without truly believing in Him as Lord and Savior.

Those who believe are those whom God foreknew (Romans 8:29-30).

The General Theory

This theory teaches that Christ died for sinners in general and not for a particular people determined before hand by God.

It further teaches that the works of the Atonement and Redemption are not united in one and the same work, but are two separate works.

In other words, God chose to reconcile the entire world through the Atonement, but He has selected from the world those who shall be redeemed.

Response

If the entire world has been reconciled through the Atonement, then there are no grounds upon which this reconciliation can be destroyed, for scripture declares, *"I know that whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever; nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it; and God doeth it that men should fear before Him"* (Ecclesiastes 3:14).

Whatever God has reconciled shall remain reconciled, and nothing can be changed or altered concerning it.

This theory of the Atonement is incompatible with those scriptures which teach that Christ's death was confined to the elect (John 10:11, 15, 26-28).