

Atonement Theories

Most ancient religions practiced sacrifice to their gods – including human sacrifice. Gifts and offerings were made to show thanksgiving, for sin offerings, for currying the gods' favour, and to renew and strengthen their relationship with the gods, who controlled human destiny. In the OT, sacrifices are offered to God for these reasons, but human sacrifice is forbidden (story of Abraham and Isaac).

Atonement means “at-one-ment “, or reconciliation, where the human is restored to a relationship with God. The term was coined by William Tyndale, C15th. So “Christ atoned for our sins” = Christ reconciled us, making us one with God.

Atonement in the OT

- Abraham & Isaac – obedient to God, Abraham took Isaac, tied him up, and was willing to sacrifice him to God. He was prevented from doing so, but God was pleased with his willing obedience, and promised that he, and all people, would be blessed in his name.
- Passover Lamb – lamb's blood on doors protected Jewish firstborn from 10th plague, deflecting God's anger from them.
- Book of Leviticus:
- Day of Atonement, yearly ritual for removing sin from the whole people: 2 goats were offered for the sins of the people:
 - 1st Goat expelled: High Priest laid his hands on goat's head, which was then driven out into the wilderness, thus symbolically representing the removal of the people's sin – literally, scapegoat, & represents Satan.
 - 2nd Goat slaughtered: its blood was taken and sprinkled on the altar of the Holy of Holies. As the life-principle, blood was believed to be able to cleanse from defilement and restore to purity.
- Other offerings: flour, bread, oil, wine, “tithes” - prescribed to be offered as thanksgiving offerings to God, to win God's favour and forgiveness, or as sin offerings, for particular, personal sins

SACRIFICE can be seen as having 2 effects:

- As **Propitiation** –pleasing offering that turns away God's wrath. Satisfies justice.
- As **Expiation** – clears guilt. (punishment of a prison sentence, if served, clears a criminal's guilt.)

Christ's death was both: it was propitiatory because it honoured God as an offering of a sinless, and fully obedient life, and turned away his wrath for humanity. It was expiatory, because the blood of Jesus shed for humanity, cleansed humanity from their guilt before God.

NT Critique of OT sacrifices:

The Letter to the Hebrews offers a strong critique of the inadequacy of the OT sacrifices for taking away sins. The writer says:

1. The animal sacrifices were inadequate and ineffective: “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins”. Heb 10:4

2. The sacrifices did not have a lasting effect: “Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins” Heb 10:11

Instead, Jesus presents himself as the one, single, unique, eternally effective offering/sacrifice: “For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy...and where sins have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.”

The Models of Atonement

A. RANSOM model : Origen – C2nd

Man, having yielded to the temptations of Satan, was like to one overcome in battle. Sin is like being in a state of slavery. So if Christ’s death set man free from sin, this could be compared to the way that a captive is **set free by the payment of a ransom**. This earliest view of the Atonement, sees Jesus’ death as a **sacrifice** to God, that brings us spiritual freedom.



When a captive is ransomed, the ransom-price is paid to the one who holds him captive – in this case, the devil. St. Irenaeus writes that Christ, as the Second Person of the Trinity, “*dealt justly even with Satan, buying back from him the things which were His own.*” Origen later took up this idea, that Christ’s life was given up in ransom paid to the devil, but that in doing so, the devil had been tricked, because he had been hooked by the bait of the divine nature of Christ, but it would not be possible for him to have ownership over God, or to bear the torture of keeping him. St. Augustine agrees with Origen, saying that Christ “*deceived the deceiver*” and “*The Lord’s cross was the devil’s mousetrap: the bait which caught him was the death of the Lord.*”

Problems:

- this theory gives the devil a lot of power: the devil holds God to ransom, that God must pay to release His own creation. Surely God is sovereign and all-powerful Lord, owing nothing to anyone?
- It makes God to be a deceiver, acting deceitfully to the devil (Augustine/ Origen’s view of “bait”)

B. DEBT-SATISFACTION model : St. Anselm – C11th

Anselm adapts Origen’s Ransom model. He wrote a book “*Cur Deus Homo?*” (Why did God become Man?) where he considers why it was necessary for Jesus to be incarnated as a man and die a human death, in order to save us. Couldn’t God have just decided to forgive us?

Anselm rejects the idea that God is a cruel tyrant who would



delight in, and require, the blood of his Son, as penalty for sin. He also rejects the idea that God requires the sacrifice of an innocent life, because he is otherwise unable to forgive the guilty, or that he has to “buy off” the devil. For this reason, he rejects the ransom model. The devil has acted unjustly against us, in leading us to sin, and therefore does not have any rights against us.

Anselm suggests instead that **humanity owe a debt** – not to the devil, but **to God**. Having sinned against God, they have refused to give God the obedience and love he deserves. Humanity needs to repay God the debt, and return to God the honour due to him. Unfortunately, no human being can do this, because all are sinful. There is no-one who can honour God with a sinless and obedient life, and even if there were, that would only be returning to God no more than is due to him – it would fail to further honour him.

For this reason, the Son of God became man, to pay the debt humanity owed to God. He lived the sinless, fully obedient life to offer to God something that would **honour** God far more than a mere human life – the self-offering of the divine Person itself. By dying as an offering to God, Jesus **satisfied the debt** and restored to God the honour that was due to him, winning from God an overabundance of God’s favour (superogation of merit) which he passes on to us. The human debt could only be paid by a human, but God could only be honoured by something greater – hence the need for the sacrifice of a God-man.

Problem:

- the idea of restoring honour was typical in feudal society, where peasants and serfs had to show their obedience and service to their overlords, and owed them for being their protector on their land. It is not a biblical model of relationships, and so perhaps inappropriate to see Jesus’ death in this way.
- It makes God appear as an exacting feudal overlord, concerned for his own pride, for which he must be satisfied with the suffering of his Son. God is a debt-extractor, holding debts over us which he demands to be repaid, with interest. This is not a generous God of love and forgiveness
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C. PENAL SUBSTITUTION model : Protestant Reformers – C16th

The Protestant Reformers emphasise Jesus’ identification with sinful humanity, so that his death was a substitution for our death, which is the logical consequence of sin (we die naturally, but our sins bring us to spiritual death). As the Son of God, his sacrifice on our behalf was unique, and forever effective. The Reformers argue that Jesus had to die, not only because he was substituting himself for us, but because only this would satisfy God’s wrath against sinners. Breaking even one commandment is going against God himself, as the law expresses God’s character. Sin cannot be overlooked, as it offends against the holy God. It has to be atoned for. God’s justice requires that that we deserved to be punished for sin, but since He is also a merciful God, God himself becomes the substitute that carries the punishment, in Jesus.



This model shows Jesus’ death in sacrificial terms: he is like the Passover lamb, whose blood saved the Jews from punishment of the 10th plague; or like the two goats of the Day of Atonement: like the scapegoat,

expelled from the community, carrying the sins of the whole people, and the slaughtered goat, whose blood offered on the altar had a purifying effect for the people.

NT quotes that support this include:

- “For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Mk10:45
- For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. Mt 26:28
- “We considered him as someone punished, struck by God and afflicted. But he was pierced through for our faults, he was crushed for our sins ... on him lies a punishment that brings us peace... we, like sheep, had gone all gone our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the sins of us all... harshly dealt with, he bore it humbly.” (Isa 53:4-6 - text of the Suffering Servant, who suffers on behalf of what others deserve)
- “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, by becoming a curse for us” (Gal 3:13)
- “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood--to be received by faith.” (ie Jesus’ death brings us spiritual benefits of forgiveness of sin, and we can only receive this through faith, not by anything we might do: we are justified by faith) (Rom.3:25)

Problems:

- in emphasizing God’s justice exacting punishment, the atonement is seen in terms of the criminal justice system, with God presented as a vengeful, wrathful judge, seeking to satisfy his sense of justice and express his judgement on human sin. It ignores the injustice that an innocent person is receiving the punishment.
- It is a model rooted in violence. It makes it seem that the son is split from the Father, and has to “save us” from the Father’s wrath: but the Trinity is one, and it is incorrect to think of Christ as loving and forgiving, but the Father as punishing. God is shown as merciful and forgiving, in the act of substituting his son as his own self for us, but not in the way that we see Jesus is treated.
- It also doesn’t make sense of why the resurrection happened: if what mattered was Jesus dying as a substitute victim, why wasn’t the cross the end of the story? In fact the whole story of Jesus’ life, and the fact of the resurrection, suggest that Jesus’ achievement was not primarily to allay God’s anger, but to offer human beings new life in the transforming power of God, which frees us from a sinful life.
- There are in fact examples of God forgiving unconditionally: the Our Father prayer assures us of forgiveness if we forgive others. Acts 8:22 advises: “Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you“. There is no logic that forgiveness must be obtained by punishment.
- It focuses exclusively on Jesus’ death, and ignores the meaning of his life and mission. Perhaps it should be linked to the Moral Example theory or the Christus Victor theory: Jesus dies the sacrificial, atoning death because of the way that he lived, confronting evil and in living so unselfishly for others.

D. CHRISTUS VICTOR model : Gustav Aulen – C19th

200 years before Jesus, there was an increasingly held view by Jews, that the world was held hostage by evil powers. Satan was seen as the real ruler of this world, possessing all kingdoms and giving authority to rule over them. Aulen argues that Jesus saw his mission to

be wresting control from the devil, and reclaiming God’s creation for God. We are saved, when we are liberated from the grip of evil, and our destruction due to our sins, is nullified. Jesus defeats the powers of evil by living a life of complete obedience to God and self-sacrifice. He confronts evil, injustice and discrimination at every level (racism, sexism, legalism & judgmentalism of the Pharisees), healing people and performing exorcisms, even to the point of his own arrest and crucifixion: these are acts of war against destructive powers, as well as examples for us to follow. Jesus’ sacrifice is not a price paid to the devil, but the



necessary cost of waging war against the powers of evil. In the OT history of Israel, God handed the nation Israel over to her enemies, in punishment for her sins – in the NT, Jesus is similarly “handed over” by God to death, not only as a substitute victim of God’s anger, but to defeat these powers (the resurrection). Salvation is seen as liberation from evil powers. This theory depicts God as truly loving, acting in his Son for our freedom. However, it also shows the real, objective nature of evil, and the very real suffering that comes in the struggle against it.

OT/ NT quotes:

Psalm 110: “The LORD says to my lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."

John 12:31 “Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.”

Ephesians 6:12 (St.Paul): “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

Colossians 2:15: “And having disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. “

Problems:

- This view downplays the notion of individual responsibility and our guilt against God – Jesus acts on a cosmic level against the forces of evil, and our personal sin is not really the issue that he comes to deal with.
- The model does not explain why the victory over Satan brings forgiveness of sins.
- It is also difficult to explain why Jesus must sacrifice himself on this model: although Jesus’ sacrifice does defeat the devil’s temptation against selfishness and disobedience (witness Jesus’ struggle in Gethsemane), it is not itself an act of warfare that takes back control from the devil.
- Jesus’ ministry was arguably more about proclaiming the Kingdom of God to people, rather than being primarily about spiritual warfare, although this was involved.

E. MORAL EXAMPLE model: Popular with C20th Modern Liberal Theologians (though the originally suggested by Augustine C4th and later Abelard C11th)

The Enlightenment in the 18th century was a time when people began to turn to science, and accept only reason as the way to truth. If something did not make sense to reason, it was pushed aside (eg doctrine of the Trinity). Similarly, Jesus was seen more as just a human teacher, and an inspirational role model, an example for self-improvement.

Moral example theories do not see Jesus’ death on the cross as achieving any spiritual victory, or mysteriously freeing us from sin, or making a difference to anyone else. These are seen as superstitions from a bygone age. Rather, Jesus’ death shows **the extent of God’s love** for us, in being willing to suffer death, while still showing us forgiveness.

Moral example theories believe individuals are responsible for their own actions, and no-one else can do anything on our behalf. Jesus' death is not seen as bringing us direct spiritual benefits, but is only effective if it inspires to become better people, living more unselfishly for others. It also **inspires us to a deep love** of Jesus: this love for Jesus **turns our hearts to repent** from sin, and is a source of strength for us to act against evil and sin, and **follow his example**.

NT quotes:

- “If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it..Mt 16:24
- "For **God so loved the world** that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life". Jn 3:16

Problem:

- It doesn't make sense of why Jesus had to die: his life and teachings show God's love for others and a perfect moral example of living.
- It suggests that human beings can improve themselves by their own efforts, saving themselves through morally good actions (**salvation by works**) rather than through faith: this makes the death of Christ useless. St.Paul rejects the idea that fulfilling the Jewish laws and religious commandments, can ever by themselves achieve salvation, but he does agree with St.James that doing good works is **part of a true life of faith**, and leads to salvation. (James 2:14-26)
- If Jesus' death was one of the most powerful moral examples known to man, and an ultimate source of wisdom in living well, it doesn't make sense of how the atrocities of the 20th century could have taken place. It is very doubtful that knowledge can save the human race.
- It takes a very narrow view of the universe, as a mechanical and materialistic system, excluding spiritual realities.

Evaluation 1: Is God a cruel tyrant?

The following models could all be said to present God in a way which is not a Christian understanding of the nature of God:

Ransom model – God as deceiver, deceiving the devil with the “bait” of Christ

- **Debt-satisfaction model** – exacting, keeping accounts of what humanity owes him, requiring his pride to be compensated, unwilling to forgive freely, but requiring the price of son's suffering to be satisfied.
- **Penal substitution model** – wrathful God, seeking to vent his wrath, vengeance on humanity, thinking it just to inflict his wrath on an innocent victim that doesn't deserve it (is that justice?), “cosmic child abuse”. It is a strange logic that death and suffering compensate for the generosity of forgiveness. A model rooted in violence.

On the other hand:

The Penal Substitution view:

- It retains the sense of sin as something serious, that cannot be waived away, but must be dealt with: Keeps a strong sense of justice and of the seriousness and unacceptability of sin
- In Jesus, God is himself the sacrifice, that satisfies his justice (Abraham was forbidden to sacrifice his son): shows God's mercy
- Jesus is a willing sacrifice: he himself also chooses and follows this path: the Trinity acts and wills as one. The son's suffering is not against his will. "child abuse" criticisms fail to recognise this.
- It is biblical: the Suffering Servant texts in Isaiah, and NT quotes are clear about the possibility of God's chosen messiah acting in a sacrificial way so as to benefit others spiritually. It is also according to the biblical models of covenant, where one person's life is bound up with God (eg Abraham, Moses, David), involving some sacrifices but bringing great blessings. Others are invited to be part of it too, and benefit from the blessings.

The Ransom and Debt Satisfaction models

Do take seriously the fact that sin has a cumulative effect, and sinful humanity is a humanity that dishonours itself and God. It takes seriously the relationship of responsibility between creature and Creator: God is not just a capricious tyrant.

Evaluation 2: Are the Models Mutually Exclusive?

Moral example model – compatible with many other models

This was an early model (C4th) emphasising the moral goodness of Jesus' life. It is an atonement model in the sense that Jesus' life can inspire devotion, repentance and improvement of life. By itself, this model does not speak of the necessity of his death – only that his death was a great example of self-sacrificial love. It also implies salvation through works: that Jesus inspires us to improve our behaviour by our own efforts, and this is what saves us. St Paul rejected such a view as "justification by works", contradicting "justification by faith". It makes Jesus' death pointless. Therefore, this model should be complemented by another model that redresses the balance, and shows the value of Jesus' death, as something that God did for us.

- eg Penal Satisfaction model, which does emphasise the way that Jesus' death was necessary as propitiation and expiation of sins, personally committed, and the need to receive this forgiveness by faith through him
- eg debt-satisfaction model, since only Jesus' perfect life **offered in sacrifice** propitiates God and restores to God the honour that is due to him.

The moral example model by itself doesn't explain why Jesus ended up dying the rejected death of a criminal. This gap could be complemented by the Christus Victor model, which presents Jesus as acting in ways that are not only moral, but confronted evil at every level, causing conflict and incurring the anger and envy of others. His death was therefore the result of the reaction of the powers of evil to his mission and his moral example. Moral Example + Christus Victor helps to explain why he died in the way he did.

Christus Victor model - emphasises Jesus' struggle with cosmic powers of evil, that hold not just humanity, but the whole of creation hostage. It is therefore not compatible with models which emphasises our "personal" debt to God as the main thing that Jesus must deal with.

- it does not work well with penal substitution view, which requires that a person personally believe in Jesus through faith, to obtain the benefits of forgiveness of sin.
- It does not work well with the debt-satisfaction model also emphasises the overall debt of humanity to God, rather than the controlling powers of evil, and it focuses on the goal of restoring the honour due to God, which only the god-man could repay.

On the other hand, it does fit in with the Ransom model, which could be seen as a precursor model. Here too, the main focus is releasing the devil's grip over humanity. but the Christus Victor model is superior in avoiding the problems of having to portray God as deceiving the devil. It can complement the moral example model, helping to explain why his good life resulted in his death: because his moral example challenged the powers of evil and resulted in their hostile reaction.

Penal Substitution Model

Emphasises need for Jesus' death as propitiation and expiation, effective in forgiving the sins of those who accept his death on their behalf, through faith.

And moral example:

- As a biblical model, showing continuity with OT types of sacrifices, it is superior and distinct from the moral example theory, in explaining how sin is dealt with, on a supernatural level. The Moral Example theory has a no supernatural elements, and sees Jesus' life only in terms of a moral example, which has no spiritual effects on sin.
- However, it could be complemented by the moral example model, since the Penal Subs. Model only focuses on Jesus' death, but for most people, his life is also significant: the moral example model would give us a better appreciation of the whole of Jesus' life and help emphasise the fact that a good life is the appropriate response of faith, to what Jesus did for us, so the two are linked.

And debt-satisfaction/ ransom models

- The PS model is similar to debt-satisfaction/ ransom models, as in these there is also a requirement for Jesus' sacrifice as the only way sin can be cleansed, or that the devil will release his power over humanity. These models also recognise a need to satisfy justice, in terms of a debt paid to God, or in terms of recognising the just effects of sin, as bondage to the devil.
- Does not link very well to Christus Victor model, which sees sin as a result of cosmic struggle, rather than personal guilt to be removed.

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