

Salvation: God's Love Forever

Bethany Bible Church, Adult Sunday School Class, April 14, 2013

The Theories of The Atonement

A key concept in our salvation is “atonement”. How does Jesus’ suffering atone for our sins? There have been several different “theories” that sought to answer that question. These theories all turn to the Bible to show that Jesus’ death saves us. But *how* does His death save us? These different theories give different answers. As the church’s understanding of this doctrine developed, many of these theories proved to be inadequately stated; because they failed to take everything into account. Knowing some of the most important of these various theories helps us to avoid their errors and better grasp the whole truth.

We can categorize the different theories in three ways:

I. THOSE THAT FOCUS ON MAN’S BONDAGE TO SATAN.

A. The ‘Ransom’ Theory. This theory was first articulated by a 2nd to 3rd century teacher in the early church named Origen. But its most famous contemporary version is suggested to us by C.S. Lewis in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The Bible teaches that Jesus came “to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).¹ So, in this theory, Jesus’ death is viewed as a ransom paid to Satan to to purchase man from any claim Satan had over him--in much the same way as Lewis’ Aslan sought to make a deal with the White Witch in order to free Edmond. (Some have even gone so far as to have called this theory ‘the Narnian theory of atonement’.) The problem is, though, that this assumes that Satan had a legitimate claim on man that can only be satisfied by a ‘ransom’ that God would be obliged to pay. The Bible doesn’t tell us to whom the ‘ransom’ was paid--if it was actually “paid” to anyone at all. It may be nothing more than a figure of speech for the cost of our deliverance.



B. The ‘Recapitulation’ Theory. This theory was taught by a 2nd century teacher named Irenaeus. Satan had started a downward trend in humanity in the Garden of Eden. But Romans 5:15-21 tells us how Jesus stepped in and reversed the damage done upon Adam and his race by Satan. In this theory, Jesus ‘recapitulated’ the story of man (that is, ‘repeated’ it; but this time, with a different outcome). He willingly experienced all the stages of man’s story in Himself--even substituting His obedience for man’s disobedience--to undo the damage Satan did. But this theory doesn’t make clear how Jesus’ work undoes Satan’s work, or how it is connected to man so as to reverse his failure.

C. The ‘Dramatic’ Theory. This theory was made famous by a Swiss theologian of the last century named Gustaf Aulen in his book *Christus Victor*. Aulen himself explained 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.” In this theory, Jesus accomplished this victory over Satan by His death. And indeed, as the Bible says, “Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in” His death on the cross (Colossians 2:15). This theory makes Jesus seem like a character in a great ‘drama’--our ‘big brother’ who beats up the bully for us. We certainly cheer His victory for us in this great drama of the ages. But how does that victory

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actually accomplish our atonement? In what way is the penalty of our sin related to the victory of Christ and the defeat of Satan? This theory doesn't say.

II. THOSE THAT FOCUS ON AN INFLUENCE UPON MAN.

- A. The 'Moral Influence' Theory. This theory was taught by the 10th century theologian Abelard; but was most recently made famous by the American Congregationalist minister Horace Bushnell in his book *The Vicarious Sacrifice*. It taught that Jesus' death was primarily a deeply moving demonstration of God's love. And of course, it was. As Romans 5:8 says, "God demonstrates His own love toward us" in it. But in this theory, Jesus act of suffering was meant to soften the sinner's heart to repentance, and awaken in him or her a transforming response of love. The impact of Jesus' death is seen as an emotional and moral influence rather than as an atonement. It truly *is* a life-changing influence; but even so, how would it actually remove the guilt of sins already committed in the sight of a holy God?
- B. The 'Example' Theory. This theory was named after the 16th century Italian theologian Lelio Socinus and was later developed by his nephew Faustus Socinus--both of whom taught from Poland. They were early forerunners of Unitarianism. Their system of theology denied the deity of Christ, original sin, and the total inability of man to make himself acceptable to God. Therefore, they taught that Jesus' death only provided an example of faith and obedience that inspires man to live in such a way as to merit eternal life. Of course, as the Bible teaches us, Jesus did indeed "also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps" (1 Peter 2:21). But His death was only an example in the sense of illustrating obedience to the point of suffering--not of how to earn salvation! This theory ignores much of the Bible's teaching about the holiness of God, the identity of Jesus, and the extent of our fallenness.
- C. The 'Mystical' Theory. This theory was made famous by the 17th to 18th century German Theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher--often called 'the father of liberal theology'. In it, Jesus was said to have taken on a sinful human nature; and through the power of the Holy Spirit, to have triumphed over it. As Hebrews 2:19 says, it was fitting "in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings." A knowledge of Jesus' suffering would mystically influence the sinner to also triumph over it. But how this would happen is hard to say. "Mystical" is a good name for this one!

III. THOSE THAT FOCUS ON JUSTICE BEFORE A HOLY GOD.

- A. The 'Governmental' Theory. This theory was articulated by the 16th to 17th century Dutch theologian Hugo Grotius. Grotius was Arminian in his theology--that is, he emphasized (in contrast to Calvinism) the role of man's decision in salvation. His theory was developed as an argument against Socinianism and its "Example" theory--which tended to overlook sin. This theory taught that God's high regard for His own law (His 'government') demanded that death must occur for sin. It held that Jesus didn't actually die for the penalty of sin under the law, but as a demonstration of how much our holy Creator hates sin. In that sense, Jesus is "the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 2:2)--that is, that which satisfies God's just wrath and allows Him to forgive us. But how, in this theory, does Jesus' death actually "remove" our guilt? It almost makes Jesus' death seem more like a cosmic hole that God punched in the wall to show us His anger over our sins than like a real atonement for the guilt of them.
- B. The 'Satisfaction' (or 'Commercial') Theory. Perhaps the second-closest to a

truly satisfying theory came from the 11th century Benedictine monk and philosopher St. Anselm of Canterbury. In his book *Cur Deus Homo* (“Why The God-Man”), sin was treated with appropriate seriousness. Sin was viewed as something that robbed God of honor--a debt to God’s justice that legally required a payment. Because Jesus was Himself sinless, His death brought honor to God and ‘satisfied’ Him. As Jesus said, “Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again” (John 10:17). As a result of Jesus’ obedient sacrifice, God gave Him a reward of grace that He did not need (because He Himself was sinless); and Jesus was able to pass the merits of this excess store of grace on to us. We receive this ‘supererogation’ of grace into our ‘account’ by faith. But as much as this theory has going for it, it still leaves unclear how Jesus’ death serves as an actual payment--an actual ‘atonement’--for our sin.

- C. The ‘Penal-Substitution’ Theory. Of all the theories, this one seems to do the best job of connecting Jesus’ death to our need. It was most thoroughly expressed by the 16th century French reformer John Calvin; and takes seriously the sinfulness of sin, God’s holy demand of justice, our inability and our need for grace, and the sufficiency of Jesus’ death to fully meet our need. In this theory, Jesus’ death was ‘vicarious’--that is, as a true substitute who died on our behalf. He Himself--as a sinless Substitute--actually bore on the cross the real penalty for our sin that we ourselves should have suffered; making God both just *and* the Justifier (Romans 3:26) of those who place their faith in Jesus. As Isaiah 53:6 says, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

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The ‘Penal-Substitution’ Theory is so important that we’ll talk in greater detail about it in our next time together.

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from The Holy Bible, New King James Version; copyright 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc.