

Sermon on atonement

In Acts 16 we read the story of the jailer who believes he should die because it looks like these Christian prisoners have escaped—perhaps he understood the violent earthquake that opened the doors of the jail as proof of these Christians’ God. Perhaps he knew he would be held accountable for their escape and would rather die at his own hand than the punitive system of Rome. Paul and Silas stop him and he cries out, “what must I do to be rescued?” Remember the word *Sodzo* we talked about a few weeks ago—save, rescue, deliver, heal. Some translations go with rescued, some go with saved. So The Christians take this as an opportunity to witness to the saving reign of God that in a quite literal and dramatic way, broke into human history and gave this man and his family a chance to enter into a trusting relationship with the God of life.

This question, “What must I do to be saved?” has been asked ever since.

I want to give a brief summary of the major theories of atonement this morning. We need to acknowledge that each of these theories is put together by human beings in a certain location in a certain time in history. They bring their questions from their contexts with their own biases and perspectives, just like we do.

One theologian, Tim Mackie of the Bible Project, commented that the theories of atonement show an inability for people to enter into the mindset of the OT in order to understand the significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection and how Paul and other NT writers interpreted it.

As I re-read Romans and Galatians, I thought to myself, “the 1st century main question is how are we made righteous—is it still through the Law or did things fundamentally change in light of God’s grace shown in Jesus and God’s power over sin and death through raising Jesus from the dead? What does it mean that Jesus fulfilled the Law? Was Jesus’ sacrifice of his life a final sacrifice to make things right between humans and God?

These atonement theories bring modern questions to an ancient text and sometimes I would say that the text gets cherry-picked and stretched to create coherent systems. Obviously, it is not wrong to bring our current questions to the text and try to extrapolate meaning, but we need to hold them lightly and with humility. These theories have had a massive impact so it is important to know what they say.

Now, let’s dive in. Each theory tries to answer the question what saves us? Is it the Death of Jesus? Is it the life of Jesus? Is it both? What exactly did the death of Jesus do?

The first theory is the Ransom theory, and that word is used in Mark 10:45 and Ephesians 1. This theory says there is a ransom owed to death and the devil. The point of Jesus’ death is to buy back humanity from the clutches of the devil. There is no other way for that debt to be paid by humans except through Jesus’ death on the cross. The critique of this is, why does God need to pay the devil? Are they on the same level?

The next theory that was the most predominant theory until the 12th century is called Christus Victor. This theory states that Christ’s death was to defeat the power of sin and death and to

give humans freedom from bondage to sin and death. No payment is being made. The resurrection of Jesus is the triumphant display of the defeat of the powers.

In the 12th century a new theory came along called Satisfaction. A man by the name of Anselm said That it is the justice and honor of God that needs to be satisfied through the death of Jesus. Humanity's sin is a terrible offense, a terrible injustice. So humanity owes a debt to God, not to the devil, to make restitution. Jesus' extraordinary act of obedience was the only way to satisfy God's justice and restore God's honor. Jesus is a substitute for us. God is the object of atonement in this theory.

The next theory is Moral Influence, which came as a response to Anselm's Satisfaction theory. God became flesh in order to transform people. Following Jesus' example gives us an ethical way to live that honors God. Close communion with God., who is the source of all goodness, is possible. Jesus' death was a demonstration of God's love for humanity. This theory joins salvation with ethics. The weakness of this one is that it underemphasizes Jesus' violent death on the cross and God's role in that.

Another theory is called Penal Substitution and it builds on Anselm's theory of satisfaction. It is not that the devil needs to be satisfied but that God's justice and furthermore God's wrath must be satisfied as a result of our sin. It shifts the focus from God's honor and God's love as the motivating factor and emphasizes our guilt and the punitive nature of Jesus' death.

Someone needs to be punished for our sin. Jesus takes the punishment for us so that God

doesn't have to punish us eternally. In this theory, you are either going to heaven or going to hell after death and many have lived their lives in fear of eternal damnation.

There are many Bible verses that talk about Jesus being our substitute and some advocates of this theory remind us that this theory is borne out of love. God wants to commune with us but cannot stand sin and cannot let it go unpunished because that would not be consistent with God's nature. This is the theory that is often described as God being a judge, a person is on trial and is being sentenced to death for their sin but Jesus stands up in the crowd and says, "Wait! I'll take that punishment." So righteousness is imputed into us. This theory is probably the most common among evangelical and reformed circles and has touched and changed many lives over many centuries.

But it has become increasingly under question because of the violent nature of the theory and how that has played out in justifying all kinds of violence in the name of God. Let's take the myth of redemptive violence, for instance. With the backing of this theory, violence can be justified if it seems to serve a larger good purpose. The ends justify the means. Another example is women submitting to abusive spouses because their husband and their pastor says the Bible says so. While the wrath of God is definitely a reality in the Biblical witness, we must question whether we all deserve to die just for being born human and fallible. Although there are many scriptures that are used (cherry-picked) to justify this theory, this death sentence scenario is actually not well-attested in the Bible.

Modern Critiques of this theory include what is called Scapegoat Theory. Perhaps you've heard of Rene Gerard, a French thinker or James Allison, a Catholic theologian who say that to follow this penal substitution theory means you are basically seeing God as a divine child abuser.

They bring up that Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:19 that in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself. God acts for our good not to satisfy an internal dispute inside of God's self or inside the Trinity on whether God can only change God's mind about us once each individual person confesses Christ as their Lord and Savior.

This theory says that Jesus died a violent death as a scapegoat to satisfy the needs of violent humanity, not to satisfy God's justice or God's wrath. In this theory, the crowd is responsible for Jesus' death because they think he is guilty, but Jesus is proven innocent by God and the resurrection shows that what God condemns is violence in humans.

They critique the other theories as being very individualistic, as if the community of faith has nothing to do with anything. They counter that with the conviction that God is willing to suffer violence and to be its victim in order to save and redeem on a societal scale. This theory has political and social implications.

And now we come to Anabaptist understandings of the atonement. Anabaptists have always emphasized the life and teachings of Jesus; we emphasize the gospels over the epistles. We focus on ethics and the Sermon on the Mount that instructs us how to live following Jesus in daily life. So what do we say about what saves us and about these man-made theories?

Professor J. Denny Weaver has written extensively on what he calls the nonviolent atonement. He would definitely be in the scapegoat camp. But he also takes pieces of Christus Victor and Moral Influence and combines it in a theory that he calls Narrative Christus Victor. The “narrative” stands for the life and teachings of Jesus, Christus Victor is about defeating the powers both of violent humanity and the spiritual powers and principalities within systems. The weakness of this theory is that it seems to ignore some key scriptures about God's will in the death of Jesus, such as Gal. 1:4 He (Jesus) gave himself for our sins to set us free according to the will of the Father.

We have another Anabaptist theologian named John Driver and he spent many years in service to the church in other countries thinking deeply about Anabaptist theology, including atonement. He wrote a book about the images of the atonement in the Bible and its implications for God's mission in the world. His point is that we need all of the images in the Bible and less of these human-made theories. He names 11 major images of what saves us according to the biblical witness including:

Conflict-victory-liberation motif: salvation occurs when God pours out righteousness, his own life-giving power, in such a way that both god's people and all creation are delivered from the forces of evil and established in God's kingdom. Jesus shows that he has power over other powers when he heals saves rescues and delivers people from all kinds of fears, physical danger, illnesses and demon possession. Because we live in a conflicted world the full

realization of Christ's ultimate healing and liberating power will not be seen until the end of times. This is what Christus Victor theory is built on and is well attested in the New Testament.

Vicarious suffering: this motif is seen strongly in the Servant Songs of Isaiah. Both Jesus and the apostles use the images in these passages to interpret the meaning of Christ's messianic mission. According to the biblical perspective a connection exists between the alleviation of physical evils and the expiation of sin. The same servant bore our diseases and bore the sin of many in Isaiah 53. In this motif, the servant suffers rejection, misunderstanding and ultimately death on behalf of our sins and you can see how this was used in the Substitution theories.

What those theories miss is the ongoing implications for our lives based on the example of Jesus, the Lamb of God. They were happy to use the power of the State, enforced religion, and violence as a means to establish power over instead of suffering with, as Jesus did.

Martyr motif-- Because Jesus went to his death voluntarily, patiently, innocently and in absolute obedience to the will of God (Is 53), his dying has an unbounded expiating (make amends) virtue.

Sacrifice motif--IN Hebrews Christ sacrificed himself and Jesus is priest and sacrifice, Christ fulfilled original role of sacrifice- restored relationship. Our well-being (salvation) depends on simply trusting obediently in God who provides for absolutely all of the needs of his people. Christians and Church are new Temple, bring sacrifice of praise, service and economic sharing.

Expiation (making amends/reparations) **and the wrath of God:** Driver says that the wrath of God in the OT and NT should be understood in terms of cause and effect. If humanity chooses to follow sinful ways and reject God's ways of covenantal love, then God's wrath will come in the sense that there will be natural consequences for our actions. Other nations may attack and destroy Israel, for instance. In the NT, Rom. 3:21-26 we read that the wages of sin are death. We access the mercy of God through faith in Jesus making expiation/amends so that sin is purged and cleansed from the environment of our relationship with God. (Remember Day of Atonement in Lev. 16?)

Redemption-purchase motif: Ransom payment for purchase out of slavery to sin would be common understanding in Greco-Roman world. Luke sees ransom as freedom from bondage to Rome. Paul sees it as freedom from bondage to sin, elemental spirits and the curse of the Law. The ransom is paid through Christ so that we can become the people of God for service (not as Anselm interpreted, that God's honor must be restored)

Reconciliation: Only Paul uses this term. God is reconciling us to him through Christ and then gives us the ministry of reconciliation. At-one-ment with God with achieved through the cross. It will mean a radical change both inwardly and outwardly. God's wrath changes to mercy in reconciliation.

Justification: The Cross is where the righteousness of God is most clearly revealed. It was not an accident, not merely a predetermined event designed to pay a legal penalty. It was the severest test of Jesus' faithfulness and obedience to a faithful God on behalf of faithless

humanity. The only adequate response to God's righteous acts is to act according to God's revealed way of justice- covenant law (Micah 6:8)

- Sermon on the Mount is highest form of covenant law- genuine love
- Faith--lasting inner and outer conviction- to accept God's covenant promises and justice as right, to stand unshakable on this foundation, to act, suffer, hope and serve on this foundation is to believe. It is obedience and commitment to God who is proven faithful.

Adoption-family image: straightforward, intimate parent-child relationship, therefore will not elaborate

Various archetypal images- Jesus represents us, goes before us and is in solidarity with us

Divine- human communion is God's intention from creation. This has outworkings in the human realm as well. The restoration of community, and the breaking down of barriers that divide us, is the central thrust of God's saving activity throughout salvation history. The church is called to be a reconciled and reconciling community, which rejects the myth of redemptive violence. The church witnesses to this reconciliation and represents God's Kingdom interests among the subjects of another realm. God's people invite others in the worldly Kingdom to become citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Driver sees the life and teachings of Jesus, and not just the death and resurrection of Jesus as part of his atoning work. Since Jesus addressed the whole well-being of humanity in his life, so should we. This includes Christ-centered ethics which radically address the questions of

economics, prestige, and power as belonging in the sphere of the gospel. In light of the meaning of the work of Christ, evangelists must, by the nature of the gospel they proclaim, be peacemakers; peacemakers, in the interest of the authenticity of the peace they seek, should be evangelists.

Further, it is not enough for people to be converted under the satisfaction theory of the atonement because in that theory there is no call to a change of life that since Jesus did all the work for us. True salvation, according to Driver, leads to transformation, and this is a life-long process, being changed from glory to glory into God's image (2 Cor. 3:18). And this is not possible without the nurture of the community of believers. In conclusion, Driver says that salvation is cosmic, social and personal.

Questions to continue the conversation on atonement, like the jailer asking, What must I do to be saved?

What do you believe about who God is and what God is doing in the world? Was it God's love or God's wrath motivating what Jesus did on the cross and in his life?

Was the death of Jesus primarily the result of violent humanity and God stood by and let it happen to reveal the sinful nature of humanity who would even crucify their own God-made-flesh?

Does Jesus' death and resurrection save our souls as individuals or us collectively as humanity?

Do people have to do anything to access salvation and if so, what?

Are there cosmic powers of evil at play and if so, did Jesus' death defeat them in some way?

Recalling the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, where the sacrificial system cleanses/purifies the polluted environment in the relationship between God and humanity, how does Jesus fulfill this?

What saves us—the life and teachings of Jesus, the death of Jesus, the resurrection, the exaltation of Jesus? Some of the above? All of the above?