

# Atonement: What actually happened at the cross?

*"The cross stands at the heart of the Christian faith. But what does it mean? How can we make sense of it?" – Alister McGrath*



That is a question many people have tried to answer. We will never fully plumb the depths of what was accomplished on the cross, and our best efforts to understand it will always come up short. Yet there is value in thinking about it, and there are helpful (and less helpful) ways of doing so.

## The results of the cross

The word 'atonement' is an old English word, literally 'at-one-ment' – to bring two parties together so they are 'at one' with each other, i.e. reconciliation. The Bible gives several pictures to illustrate what happens to us as a result of the cross. For example, we are like:

- Pardoned criminals (Romans 5:16)
- Freed slaves (Romans 6:17-18)
- Adopted children (Ephesians 1:4-6)
- New creations (2 Corinthians 5:17)

All of this means we are reconciled to God and restored to relationship with him. But what actually happened on the cross to achieve all this? We need to be wary of a scientific Western mind-set that insists on knowing the exact mechanics of it all (it is far too rich and mysterious for us to fully grasp anyway!) But, keeping that in mind, let's think about some of the many theories that have arisen over the centuries.

## Theories of the Atonement

### The 'ransom to the devil' theory

In the early centuries of the church, one popular train of thought started with the statement of Jesus that he would pay a 'ransom for many' (Mat 20:28, etc.) Much speculation existed as to whom the ransom was paid. The conclusion was that it was the devil who received the ransom from Christ. However, this did not satisfy everyone – after all, it placed too much power and influence in the hands of the devil rather than God.



### Anselm: Satisfaction by substitution

Anselm was an influential 11<sup>th</sup> century theologian whose theories on the cross (with some modifications) are still widely accepted by evangelicals today. He proposed that sin offends God's 'honour', which then requires some 'satisfaction' to restore. Only humanity owes this debt but only God is *great* enough to pay it. The incarnation (Jesus as both God *and* man) resolves the problem through his voluntary death in our place. Over time, this view evolved into '*penal substitution*' – God punishing Jesus, instead of us, to satisfy justice. One weakness with this is that God could appear conflicted, subject to some arbitrary law of 'justice' outside himself that he cannot escape, forcing a dilemma between his justice and his love.



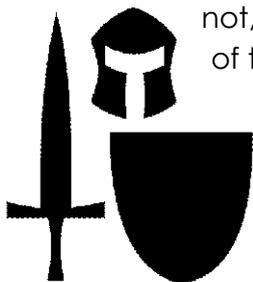
### Peter Abelard: Moral influence theory

Abelard strongly challenged Anselm's thinking (as well as finding time to live a colourful and not altogether admirable personal life!) He saw the effect of the cross as providing such an example of God's love that it awakens a response of love in us, allowing us to be saved. His thinking still finds favour with some, e.g. some Catholics. Its weakness is that unless Jesus' death actually *achieved* something concrete it cannot serve as an example of love, but would simply be meaningless bravado.

In reality, it is quite likely that Abelard did not wholly reject the notion of satisfaction (and Anselm was not as extreme as some of his followers) but these two men have come to represent two extremes, sometimes called the '*objective*' view (something must change outside of humans, i.e. in God, for us to be saved) and the '*subjective*' view (something needs to change in us, rather than in God).

### Christus Victor

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Swedish theologian Gustav Aulen wrote a famous work which became known as 'Christus Victor' (Christ the victor), in which he claimed that the early church's view of the atonement was



not, in fact, a ransom paid to the devil but rather the *defeat* of the devil (and of sin and death) by Christ. He called this the '*classic*' view, in which God defeats all our enemies to restore us to himself. This view avoids a perceived '*discontinuity*' between God and Jesus, and it takes seriously the reality of spiritual warfare and evil powers. However, humanity could appear as a '*prize*' to be won.

Aulen rejected the other views as rivals, however many have come to see value in all of these views as facets of a greater whole – that through Christ God simultaneously dealt with sin to put us right with him (the objective view), awakened our love for God (the subjective view) and defeated all our enemies (the classic view).

## Recent developments

In recent years, the idea of God punishing an innocent person (Jesus) to pay a debt or ransom to himself has come under question and attack. Whilst good theologians have usually been careful not to portray God divided against God, the idea of a wrathful Father torturing and killing his innocent Son has become increasingly unacceptable in our modern culture. It also seems to flow against the renewed ideas of Trinity and the unbreakable relationship at the heart of God. However, the idea of Christ dying in our place is precious and foundational to many Christians.



What are we to make of this? Is there a way to keep the best of the old model whilst avoiding the extremes? We will look into this in Part 2.

## Discussion time...

Consider the following questions:

1. Which 'theory' of the atonement were you originally taught?
2. What about it, if anything, is important to you personally?
3. What flaws can you see in it, if taken to extremes?

## Part 2: A Biblical Vision of the Atonement

Despite the best efforts of careful theologians, teaching on 'penal substitution' can easily tip into a vision of an angry deity, bent on blood, needing to be pacified by human sacrifice, which is actually a pagan concept and not at all what first century Jews (or Christians) believed. So how do we avoid this danger?

### 'According to the Scriptures'

In his excellent book on the cross<sup>1</sup>, Tom Wright says:

*"In many expressions of pagan religion, the humans have to try to pacify the angry deity. But that's not how it happens in Israel's scriptures. The biblical promises of redemption have to do with God himself acting because of his unchanging, unshakeable love for his people." – Tom Wright*

Atonement is, from first to last, the work of God acting in love. God is not conflicted within – the whole Trinity was involved. According to John Stott, 'George Buttrick wrote of a picture which hangs in an Italian church, although he did not identify it. At first glance it is like any other painting of the crucifixion. As you look more closely, however, you perceive the difference, because there's a vast and shadowy Figure behind the figure of Jesus. The nail that pierces the hand of Jesus goes through to the hand of God. The spear thrust into the side of Jesus goes through into God's.'



The essential key to having the right view of the cross, as we saw in the last session on the Gospel, is that Jesus died '**according to the Scriptures**' (1Cor 15:1-4), in other words we must keep it all within the context of the overall story of the people of Israel, as laid out in the Old Testament.

Israel had broken the covenant with God, thus missing their vocation – to image God and bring his salvation to the nations. They were in ongoing 'exile', needing forgiveness of sins for a new 'exodus' from slavery (see last session). God had predicted covenant 'curses' that would result from this (Deut 28:15). Jesus similarly, in his ministry, predicts that pagan nations (Rome) will destroy them if they do not repent (see Luke 13:1-8). (This happened in AD 70.) But to pre-empt this, amazingly, at the cross Jesus steps in as Israel's representative and substitute, and draws these very curses (including the anger of the Romans) on himself, dying the death prescribed for a revolutionary and rebel (like Barabbas) in place of rebel Israel, though he himself is innocent.



<sup>1</sup> *The Day the Revolution Began: Rethinking The Meaning Of Jesus' Crucifixion*, Tom Wright, SPCK, 2016

In so doing, he absorbs all of the curses, the consequences of Israel's (and the world's) sin, into himself, thereby exhausting it, drawing its sting, and making a way through. Because, through the incarnation, humanity is joined to God, we also died with him and can therefore benefit from his victory. Evil has been allowed to reach its full height and deliver its worst blow, concentrated on Jesus, and in coming to a head it is finally



dealt with. The results of sin have been borne by Jesus, so there is no more curse left for the covenant people Israel. Israel is therefore released from 'exile' and can get on with its true mandate, releasing blessing to the world. As Israel's substitute, Jesus has done what they were called to do – suffer for the nations – and has therefore also given the Gentiles their own 'exodus' from the slavery of sin, releasing them to become part of the re-launched Israel centred on Jesus.

### Wrath and punishment

So what about God's 'wrath'? God is clearly angered by things that hurt and damage people and his world, but his anger is restorative, working alongside his love – to put a stop to evil and allow good to flourish. He doesn't want people caught in the cross-fire as he does so.

In our session on the Bible, I suggested that 'wrath' or 'punishment' from God are actually Bible shorthand and metaphors for the *consequences* of sin coming upon people, i.e. *direct results* rather than an arbitrary penalty. In our last session on the Gospel, we noted that sin is not just moral failure, but the result of idolatry (Rom 1). When humans worship what is not God, the 'idols', or the spiritual powers behind them, take control and wreak havoc in people's lives. Also, those who sin damage themselves because it twists them from being the true image of God into something less. In all these ways, there are real consequences of sin. Whenever God respects people's free will and reluctantly allows the consequences of sin to impact them, it can be seen as 'wrath'.

Hence, we can speak of the cross as 'punishment' (Isaiah 53 does just this) but we must be careful not to see God as inflicting on Jesus an arbitrary punishment to satisfy justice, but rather God the Trinity stepping in to take upon himself the full consequences of sin, absorbing and overcoming it. Just as pushing the 'ransom' concept too far was unhelpful (to whom is the ransom paid?), it is unhelpful to push the 'punishment' concept too far (who is doing the punishment?). Paul states that God punished sin *in Jesus* (Rom 8:3) but is careful not to say that God punished *Jesus*. The cross demonstrates God's justice, his hatred and condemnation of sin, but also his love in absorbing and exhausting its results himself.



## Atonement achieved

Now that the full consequences of sin have been faced and overcome by Christ (and those in Christ), there is nothing left for the principalities and powers to throw at us. Forgiveness has been won and their power is broken. They can no longer accuse. There is no condemnation left. The 'idols' are overcome and we are free to worship the true God and take up our true vocation as his image and priests to creation.

In all this, no vital truth has been lost. God the Son comes into the world to do on our behalf what we could never do for ourselves, shoulders a burden and cost that we could never bear or pay, in order to reunite us with himself. This keeps the essence of Anselm's thought. The cross reveals God's unshakeable love for us and awakens a grateful response, as Abelard insisted. And by confronting and exhausting sin's results, the 'powers' are disarmed and evil is defeated – Christus Victor indeed!

## Final thoughts

The cry of Jesus from the cross, "It is finished!" has often been thought of as the closing of accounts – a bill being paid. It is better to see it as the completion of the work necessary for new creation:

Genesis 2:2 'By the seventh day God had **finished** the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.'

John 17:4 'I have brought you glory on earth by **finishing the work** you gave me to do.'



When we see the cross in the light of Israel's story, it is still 'penal' – the covenant curses are certainly a form of 'punishment', and it is also 'substitutionary' in that Jesus suffered under the curse so that we are no longer under it. However, in setting the cross in the context of the biblical narrative of Israel's vocation, failure and restoration, where God himself comes to rescue them, we avoid the unhelpful aspects and present a solidly biblical message of atonement.

*"We do not (of course!) have to give up the idea of Jesus "dying for our sins." Indeed, that remains at the very centre. But that idea is refocused, recontextualised, placed within a narrative not of divine petulance, but of unbreakable divine covenant love, embodied in the actual person, life, actions, and teaching of Jesus himself."*

*– Tom Wright*