

Atonement in Christianity

Subjects: Religion

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In Christian theology, atonement describes how human beings can be reconciled to God through Christ's sacrificial suffering and death. Atonement refers to the forgiving or pardoning of sin in general and original sin in particular through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, enabling the reconciliation between God and his creation. Within Christianity there are, historically, three or four main theories for how such atonement might work: Other theories include recapitulation theory, the "shared atonement" theory and scapegoat theory. The English word 'atonement' originally meant "at-one-ment", i.e. being "at one", in harmony, with someone. It is used to describe the saving work that God did through Christ to reconcile the world to himself, and also of the state of a person having been reconciled to God. Throughout the centuries, Christians have used different metaphors and given differing explanations of the atonement to express how the atonement might work. Churches and denominations may vary in which metaphor or explanation they consider most accurately fits into their theological perspective; however all Christians emphasize that Jesus is the Saviour of the world and through his death the sins of humanity have been forgiven.

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1. Theories of Atonement

1.1. Moral Influence Theory

One of the earliest explanations for how atonement works is nowadays often called the moral influence theory. In this view the core of Christianity is positive moral change, and the purpose of everything Jesus did was to lead humans toward that moral change. He is understood to have accomplished this variously through his teachings, example, founding of the Church, and the inspiring power of his martyrdom and resurrection. Some scholars suggest this view was universally taught by the Church Fathers in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD,^{[1][2][3]} along with what is called by Aulén the *classical* or *patristic* view, which can be variously interpreted as Ransom or Recapitulation, or under the general heading of Christus Victor.^[4] The moral influence theory also enjoyed popularity during the Middle Ages and is most often associated in that period with Peter Abelard. Since the Reformation it has been advocated by modern philosophers like Immanuel Kant, and many theologians such as Hastings Rashdall and Paul Tillich. It remains the most popular view of atonement among theologically liberal Christians. It also forms the basis for René Girard's "mimetic desire" theory (not to be confused with meme theory). It would be a mistake, however, to read this theory, or any of the theories, in isolation from the others.

1.2. Ransom Theory

- Augustine of Hippo
- Basil of Caesarea
- Gregory of Nyssa
- Gustaf Aulén
- Irenaeus of Lyons ("Recapitulation")
- Justin Martyr
- Origen of Alexandria

The second explanation, first clearly enunciated by Irenaeus,^[5] is the ransom or Christus Victor theory. Christus victor and "ransom" are slightly different from each other: in the ransom metaphor Jesus liberates humanity from slavery to sin and Satan and thus death by giving his own life as a ransom sacrifice (Matthew 20:28). Victory over Satan consists of swapping the life of the perfect (Jesus), for the lives of the imperfect (humans). The Christus Victor theory sees Jesus not used as a ransom but rather defeating Satan in a spiritual battle and thus freeing enslaved humanity by defeating the captor. This theory 'continued for a thousand years to influence Christian theology, until it was finally shifted and discarded by Anselm'.^[6]

1.3. Satisfaction Theory

- Cyril of Jerusalem disputably
- Anselm of Canterbury (See Roman Catholic soteriology)

The third metaphor, used by the 11th-century theologian Anselm, is called the "satisfaction" theory. In this picture humanity owes a debt not to Satan, but to the sovereign God himself. A sovereign may well be able to forgive an insult or an injury in his private capacity, but because he is a sovereign he cannot if the state has been dishonoured. Anselm argued that the insult given to God is so great that only a perfect sacrifice could satisfy, and that Jesus, being both God and man, was this perfect sacrifice. Therefore, the doctrine would be that Jesus gave himself as a "ransom for many", to God the Father himself.

1.4. Penal Substitution Theory

- Penalty or punishment satisfaction: John Calvin, Calvinism, and imputed righteousness
- Vicarious repentance, John McLeod Campbell and Robert Campbell Moberly

The next explanation, which was a development by the Reformers^{[7][8][9][10]} of Anselm's satisfaction theory,^[11] is the commonly held Protestant penal substitution theory, which, instead of considering sin as an affront to God's honour, sees sin as the breaking of God's moral law. Placing a particular emphasis on Romans 6:23 (the wages of sin is death), penal substitution sees sinful man as being subject to God's wrath with the essence of Jesus' saving work being his substitution in the sinner's place, bearing the curse in the place of man (Galatians 3:13).^[12] A variation that also falls within this metaphor is Hugo Grotius' "governmental theory", which sees Jesus receiving a punishment as a public example of the lengths to which God will go to uphold the moral order.

1.5. Governmental Theory

- Hugo Grotius and John Miley
- Jonathan Edwards (the younger) and Charles Grandison Finney

1.6. Recapitulation Theory

An early theory of the atonement is the recapitulation view, first comprehensively expressed by Irenaeus.^[13] In it, Christ succeeds where Adam failed,^[14] undoing the wrong that Adam did and, because of his union with humanity, leads humanity on to eternal life, including moral perfection.^[15]

1.7. Scapegoating

- James Alison
- Gerhard Förde
- René Girard
- Mark Heim
- William Tyndale

1.8. Embrace Theory

This approach, while acknowledging the other theories, also sees the Divine voluntary self-giving as the ultimate embracement of humanity in its ultimate act of sin, viz, deicide, or the murder of God, thus canceling sin on the cross.

The depth of estrangement and contortion was manifest in the kind of death administered: the death of the cross. Yet, the real story is not that the world rejected Him; the real story is that He was willing to let the world reject Him. Divine self-emptying, divine servanthood, and divine crucifixion are powerful themes that shock the philosophy of religion. Nietzsche called the greatest of all sins to be the murder of God (deicide). There was nothing more sinful than that. On the reverse, the greatest of all righteousness fulfilled was in the self-giving of the Son of God. This self-giving brought an end to the history of hostility between man and God. It cancelled all debts. Man had committed the greatest of all crimes, and God had allowed it to be done to Him in the ultimate divine sacrifice. The Cross was where Justice and Love met vis-à-vis. It was where man affirmed his estrangement and God affirmed His belongedness. It was where God accepted man as he was. The one act of righteousness by the Son of God nullified forever the writ of accusation against all humanity.^[16]

2. Compatibility of Differing Theories

Some theologians say that "various biblical understandings of the atonement need not conflict".^[17] Reformed theologian J. I. Packer, for example, although he maintains that "penal substitution is the mainstream, historic view of the church and the essential meaning of the Atonement... Yet with penal substitution at the center", he also maintains that "*Christus Victor* and other Scriptural views of atonement can work together to present a fully orb'd picture of Christ's work".^[17] J. Kenneth Grider, speaking from a governmental theory perspective, says that the governmental theory can incorporate within itself "numerous understandings promoted in the other major Atonement theories", including ransom theory, elements of the "Abelardian 'moral influence' theory", vicarious aspects of the atonement, etc.^[18]

Anglican theologian Oliver Chase Quick described differing theories as being of value, but also denied that any particular theory was fully true, saying, 'if we start from the fundamental and cardinal thought of God's act of love in Jesus Christ ... I think we can reach a reconciling point of view, from which each type of theory is seen to make its essential contribution to the truth, although no one theory, no any number of theories, can be sufficient to express its fullness.'^[19]

Others say that some models of the atonement naturally exclude each other. James F. McGrath, for example, talking about the atonement, says that 'Paul ... prefers to use the language of participation. One died for all, so that all died (2 Corinthians 5:14). This is not only different from substitution, it is the opposite of it.'^[20] Similarly, Mark M. Mattison, in his article *The Meaning of the Atonement* says, 'Substitution implies an "either/or"; participation implies a "both/and."^[21] J. Kenneth Grider, quoted above showing the compatibility of various atonement models with the governmental theory, nevertheless also says that both penal substitution and satisfaction atonement theories are incompatible with the governmental theory.^[22]

3. Confusion of Terms

Some confusion can occur when discussing the atonement because the terms used sometimes have differing meanings depending on the contexts in which they are used.^[23] For example:

- Sometimes substitutionary atonement is used to refer to penal substitution alone,^[24] when the term also has a broader sense including other atonement models that are not penal.^[25]
- Penal substitution is also sometimes described as a type of satisfaction atonement,^[26] but the term 'satisfaction atonement' functions primarily as a technical term to refer particularly to Anselm's theory.^[27]
- Substitutionary and penal themes are found within the Patristic (and later) literature, but they are not used in a penal substitutionary sense until the Reformed period.^[28]
- 'Substitution', as well as potentially referring to specific theories of the atonement (e.g. penal substitution), is also sometimes used in a less technical way—for example, when used in 'the sense that [Jesus, through his death,] did for us that which we can never do for ourselves'.^[29]
- The phrase 'vicarious atonement' is sometimes used as a synonym for penal substitution, and is also sometimes used to describe other, non-penal substitutionary, theories of atonement.^{[30][31]} Care needs to be taken to understand what is being referred to by the various terms used in different contexts.^{[23][32]}

4. Denominational Perspectives

4.1. Catholic

Early speculation regarding the nature of the atonement was couched in terminology drawn from custom and law. William Kent notes that the Atonement "...is represented as the payment of a price, or a ransom, or as the offering of satisfaction for a debt. But we can never rest in these material figures as though they were literal and adequate. As both Abelard and Bernard remind us, the Atonement is ...a sacrifice,... It was by this inward sacrifice of obedience unto death, ...that Christ paid the debt to justice."^[33]

As expressed by Pope Pius XI in his encyclical *Miserentissimus Redemptor*, in the Roman Catholic tradition the concepts of atonement and redemption are often seen as being inherently related. And atonement is often balanced with specific Acts of Reparation which relate the sufferings and death of Christ to the forgiveness of sins.^[34]

Moreover, in *Miserentissimus Redemptor* the Pontiff called acts of reparation a *duty* for Roman Catholics:

"We are holden to the duty of reparation and expiation by a certain more valid title of justice and of love." ... "Moreover this duty of expiation is laid upon the whole race of men"^[35]

Pope John Paul II referred to the concept as:

"the unceasing effort to stand beside the endless crosses on which the Son of God continues to be crucified".^[36]

4.2. Eastern Christianity

Eastern Orthodoxy and Eastern Catholicism have a substantively different soteriology. Salvation is not seen as the acceptance of a legal exchange, but as participation in the renewal of human nature itself by way of the eternal Word of God assuming the human nature in its fullness. In contrast to Western branches of theology, Orthodox Christians tend to use the word "expiation" with regard to what is accomplished in the sacrificial act. In Orthodox theology, expiation is an act of offering that seeks to change the one making the offering. The Biblical Greek word which is translated both as "propitiation" and as "expiation" is *hilasmos*, which means "to make acceptable and enable one to draw close to God". Thus the Orthodox emphasis would be that Christ died, not to appease an angry and vindictive Father or to avert the wrath of God upon sinners, but to defeat and secure the destruction of sin and death, so that those who are fallen and in spiritual bondage may become divinely transfigured, and therefore fully human, as their Creator intended; that is to say, human creatures become God in his energies or operations but not in his essence or identity, conforming to the image of Christ and reacquiring the divine likeness (see *theosis*).^[37]

4.3. Jehovah's Witnesses

According to Jehovah's witnesses, atonement for sins comes only through the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ. They believe Jesus was the "second Adam", being the pre-existent and sinless Son of God who became the human Messiah of Israel, and that he came to undo Adamic sin.^{[38][39][40][41][42][43]}

Witnesses believe that the sentence of death given to Adam and subsequently his offspring by God required an equal substitute or ransom sacrifice of a perfect man. They believe that salvation is possible only through Jesus' ransom sacrifice,^[44] and that individuals cannot be reconciled to God until they repent of their sins, and then call on the name of God through Jesus.^[45] Salvation is described as a free gift from God, but is said to be unattainable without obedience to Christ and good works that are prompted by faith. According to their teaching, the works prove faith is genuine.^{[46][47]} "Preaching the good news" is said to be one of the works necessary for salvation, both of themselves and those to whom they preach.^[48] They believe that people in the "last days" can be "saved" by identifying Jehovah's Witnesses as God's theocratic organization, and by serving God as a part of it.^[49]

4.4. Latter Day Saint Movement

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints expands the doctrine of the atonement complementary to the substitutionary atonement concept, including the following:

- *Suffering in Gethsemane.* The Atonement began in Gethsemane and ends with Christ's resurrection. (Christ's agony at Gethsemane Luke 22:44; Doctrine and Covenants 19:16-19; Mosiah 3:7; Alma 7:11-13. Christ described this agony in the Doctrine and Covenants as follows: "[The] suffering caused myself, even God [Christ], the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit..." (Doctrine and Covenants 19:18).
- *The relationship of justice, mercy, agency, and God's unconditional love.* Christ's infinite atonement was required to satisfy the demands of justice based on eternal law, rendering Him Mediator, Redeemer, and Advocate with the Father. One eternal law states that "no unclean thing can enter into the Kingdom of God." To sin is to break God's law, symbolically leaving a "stain." Thus, he proffers divine mercy to the truly penitent who voluntarily come unto him, offering them the gift of his grace to "lift them up" and "be perfected in Him" through his merits (2 Nephi 2 and 9; Alma 12, 34, and 42; Moroni 9:25; 10:33; compare Isaiah 55:1-9). We are made perfect, first, through justification, followed by sanctification.
- *No need for infant baptism.* Christ's atonement completely resolved the consequence from the fall of Adam of spiritual death for infants, young children and those of innocent mental capacity who die before an age of self-accountability, hence all these are resurrected to eternal life in the resurrection. However, baptism is required of those who are deemed by God to be accountable for their actions (Moroni 8:10-22)
- *Empathetic purpose.* Christ suffered pain and agony not only for the sins of all people, but also to experience their physical pains, illnesses, anguish from addictions, emotional turmoil and depression, "that His bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities" (Alma 7:12; compare Isaiah 53:4).

"The word [atonement] describes the setting 'at one' of those who have been estranged, and denotes the reconciliation of man to God. Sin is the cause of the estrangement, and therefore the purpose of the atonement is to correct or overcome the consequences of sin" ("Atonement" entry of the Bible Dictionary in the LDS edition of the King James Bible).

4.5. Methodism

Methodism falls squarely in the tradition of substitutionary atonement, though it is linked with Christus Victor and moral influence theories.^[50] John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, reflecting on Colossians 1:14, connects penal substitution with victory over Satan in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*: "the voluntary passion of our Lord appeased the Father's wrath, obtained pardon and acceptance for us, and consequently, dissolved the dominion and power which Satan had over us through our sins."^[50] In elucidating 1 John 3:8, Wesley says that Christ manifesting Himself in the hearts of humans destroys the work of Satan, thus making Christus Victor imagery "one part of the framework of substitutionary atonement."^[50] The Church of England priest and follower of Methodism Charles Wesley's hymns "Sinners, Turn, Why Will You Die" and "And Can It Be That I Should Gain" concurrently demonstrate that Christ's sacrifice is the example of supreme love, while also convicting the Christian believer of his/her sins, thus using the moral influence theory within the structure of penal substitution in accordance with the Augustinian theology of illumination.^[50] Methodism also emphasizes a participatory nature in atonement, in which the Methodist believer spiritually dies with Christ and He dies for humanity; this is reflected in the words of the following Methodist hymn (122):^[50]

"Vouchsafe us eyes of faith to see
The Man transfixed on Calvary,
To know thee, who thou art—
The one eternal God and true;
And let the sight affect, subdue,
And break my stubborn heart...
The unbelieving veil remove,

And by thy manifested love,
 And by thy sprinkled blood,
 Destroy the love of sin in me,
 And get thyself the victory,
 And bring me back to God...
 Now let thy dying love constrain
 My soul to love its God again,
 Its God to glorify;
 And lo! I come thy cross to share,
 Echo thy sacrificial prayer,
 And with my Saviour die."^[50]

The Christian believer, in Methodist theology, mystically draws himself/herself into the scene of the crucifixion in order to experience the power of salvation that it possesses.^[50] In the Eucharist, the Methodist especially experiences the participatory nature of substitutionary atonement as "the sacrament sets before our eyes Christ's death and suffering whereby we are transported into an experience of the crucifixion."^[50]

4.6. Emanuel Swedenborg

According to the doctrine of The New Church, as explained by Emanuel Swedenborg, there is no such thing as substitutionary atonement as is generally understood. Swedenborg's account of atonement has much in common with the Christus Victor doctrine, which refers to a Christian understanding of the Atonement which views Christ's death as the means by which the powers of evil, which held humanity under their dominion, were defeated.^[51] It is a model of the atonement that is dated to the Church Fathers,^[10] and it, along with the related ransom theory, was the dominant theory of the atonement for a thousand years.

4.7. The United Pentecostal Church

Oneness Pentecostals teach that the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the only means by which atonement can be obtained for dying humanity, and which makes the free gift of God's salvation possible. They believe that all must put faith in the propitiatory work of Christ to gain everlasting life. According to United Pentecostal theology, this saving faith is more than just mental assent or intellectual acceptance, or even verbal profession, but must include trust, appropriation, application, action, and obedience. They contend that water baptism is one of the works of faith and obedience necessary for Christ's sacrificial atonement to be efficacious.^[52]

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 30. D. W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 96 n. 2: 'James states that "historic orthodox Christianity" rests upon the doctrine of "vicarious atonement." As such, we agree -- that Christ died "for us" is the ancient apostolic faith reflected in the orthodox creeds. But as to the vicarious character of this "for us," James narrows the idea of vicarious atonement to penal substitution...'
 31. *Theology and Narrative* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), p. 248: 'Nor does Frei ever explain what he means by the word "vicarious," which is especially puzzling in light of his apparent rejection of the notion (or at least one notion) of "penal substitution," with which the term "vicarious" is often synonymous...'
 32. Cf. D. Flood, 'Substitutionary Atonement and the Church Fathers' in *Evangelical Quarterly* 82.2 (2010), p. 144: 'It is not enough to simply identify substitutionary or even penal themes in the writings of the church fathers, and assume that this is an endorsement of the Reformed understanding of penal substitution. Instead, one must look at how a patristic author is using these concepts within their own understanding of the atonement and ask: what salvic purpose does Christ bearing our suffering, sin, and death have for this author? Rather than simply 'proof-texting' we need to seek to understand how these statements fit into the larger thought-world of an author. In short, it is a matter of context. The main task of this essay, therefore, is to explore the context in which the church fathers understood substitutionary atonement.' <http://therebelgod.com/AtonementFathersEQ.pdf>
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