

Atonement: What Happened on the Cross?

*My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous,
² and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. – 1 John 2:1-2 (NRSVue)*

Broadly speaking, the concept of *atonement*, which is central to mainline Christianity,¹ refers to the reconciliation between God and humanity; the Christian tradition has interpreted the Cross – and whatever happened in the Crucifixion – in several ways over time. The common Christian understanding of the word *atonement* is sometimes expressed as: at-one-ment – that is, we are made “at one” with God. That has some merit as a quick and easy catchphrase, but there is more to it – the life, death, and resurrection are often seen as bringing reconciliation more broadly through the person and work of Christ. Still, we may be told that Jesus “died for our sins” on the Cross (Romans 4:25, 1 Corinthians 15:3, Galatians 1:4, 1 John 2:2 and 4:10). What that means is a bit of a mystery, and it is significant that the Church has never really identified an “orthodox” way of understanding the concept of atonement. That leaves room for 1) seeing the atonement as a mystery, and 2) seeking to understand what it means to you, and how it resonates with your spiritual life and path.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, the word *atonement* commonly means: “Amends or reparation made for an injury or wrong; expiation. **a.** Reconciliation or an instance of reconciliation between God and humans. **b. Atonement Christianity** The reconciliation of God and humans brought about by the redemptive life and death of Jesus.”

While the dictionary definition is quite accurate for mainline Christianity, the “how” of the atonement is a significant discussion topic. Over the centuries, various *atonement theories* have formed. The primary theories are listed here, but please note that there are many, many lesser-known theories floating around as well. One key difference between the classic theories involves whether the atonement is effected through *expiation* (removing the guilt) or *propitiation* (appeasing God), although some theories (i.e. Moral Influence) have an entirely different focus. In terms of where the theories are commonly taught (right-hand column), keep in mind that there is overlap between some of them, and the various movements are not always monolithic in terms of their teachings.

| THEORY NAMES | ESSENTIAL CLAIMS | SCRIPTURAL BASIS(?) | MOST COMMON IN |
|----------------------------|---|--|---|
| Ransom | <i>God “owed” a ransom to Satan, (or, occasionally, God demanded a ransom from humanity for their disobedience).</i> Jesus became that ransom payment. This was one of the earliest beliefs, and was based on an understanding that, from the time of the Fall (humanity’s fall from grace in the Garden of Eden), a debt was owed – typically to Satan. Here, the death of Jesus frees humanity from the bondage of sin. A major proponent of this in the early church was Origen (3 rd century), although he and others (Gregory of Nyssa) often used the term in a metaphorical sense – not necessarily a literal “payment” to Satan. One of the most common theories today. | Mark 10:45 1 Timothy 2:5-6 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 1 Corinthians 7:23 Matthew 4 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eastern Orthodox Church • Word-Faith Movement² |
| Moral Influence | <i>The death – and the life – of Jesus bring the possibility of positive transformation to the world.</i> The teachings of Jesus, along with the example of his life of love and obedience, help us to understand the reality of God’s love for the world and call us to lives of faith. The death of Jesus is the outcome of his teachings; he might be viewed as the first martyr. This is one of the earliest theories; elements of it resonated with Augustine in the 4 th century (along with the Ransom theory). See also the works of Peter Abelard (1079-1142), who systematized this later. | 1 Corinthians 11:1 1 Peter 2:21 1 John 4:9-11 John 8:12 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderate and • Liberal Traditions |
| Christus Victor | <i>In his death, Jesus defeated death and the powers of evil.</i> Similar to the Ransom theory but reinterpreted to a degree: no one is “owed” anything. Since Jesus defeated death, the human race is now freed from bondage. See Gustaf Aulén, <i>Christus Victor</i> (1931). Often held alongside other views, this was the dominant understanding for some of the early Church Fathers (Irenaeus and Athanasius) and was visible to some extent in the works of Augustine, Origen, and others.. | 1 John 3:8; 4:4 John 12:31 1 Corinthians 15:25 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anabaptist Mennonites • Peace-focused traditions • Some Liberation Theologies |
| Satisfaction | <i>Human sin dishonors the justice of God, so a sacrifice must be made.</i> Based largely on the Old Testament understanding of sacrificial sin offerings, this theory holds that God demands an offering as a propitiation for human sin. Jesus then becomes the ultimate offering – the perfect firstborn Son – for the sins of the world. Sometimes associated with Passover imagery and the Paschal Lamb, especially in John (19:14, 36); Synoptic dating differs. Put forward in the 12 th century by Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) as a response to the Ransom theory (see his writings in <i>Cur Deus Homo</i> , or <i>Why the God-Man?</i>), which too often focused on God owing a ransom to Satan. It is worth keeping in mind that the sacrificial system described in the Old Testament included more than just sin offerings; this may have addressed God’s <i>honor</i> rather than <i>wrath</i> . | Leviticus 4 and onward 1 Corinthians 5:7 Hebrews 9-10 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roman Catholic Church³ • Mainline Protestant |
| Penal Substitution | <i>The wages of sin is death. This creates a debt to God, and Jesus pays it on our behalf.</i> A modification of Anselm’s Satisfaction theory, this was developed during the Reformation and championed by John Calvin and Martin Luther, with an added legalistic framework. This would be more systematized over time by the Reformed tradition. As with the Satisfaction theory, the only way to redeem sin is a blood sacrifice. Jesus’ death on the Cross takes the place of individual sinners and pays the price that each owes. Elements of the “substitution” aspect pre-date this by centuries (potentially as early as ~130 CE in the <i>Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus</i>). | Romans 5:8-9 Romans 6:23 Hebrews 9:22 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservative / Evangelical • Reformed • Fundamentalist |
| Governmental Theory | <i>Jesus suffers punishment for the sins of humanity to make clear the depths of God’s displeasure with sin.</i> The punishment that Jesus receives is broadly appropriate, although not specific to any given sin or person. It does, however, make it publicly clear that sin is offensive to God’s being; therefore, God is able to forgive and move ahead in relationship with the world. See the works of Hugo Grotius (1583-1645). | Romans 3:24-26; 5:12-21 Hebrews 9:22 Isaiah 42:21 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-Calvinist Protestant |
| Jesus as Teacher | <i>Jesus was the mediator of true knowledge.</i> There is a secret knowledge that can only be known by those who share it; Jesus was either <i>the</i> (for early Apologists) or <i>a</i> (for some of the Gnostics/Gnosticizers) teacher who revealed that knowledge to others. Through that teaching we discover the God/Christ within us; this is about individual enlightenment. The death of Jesus signifies the inner death to ignorance that we may know the secret knowledge and grow in that truth. This is outside of historic Christian orthodoxy. | [Generally would not appeal to Christian texts; However, Jesus teaches throughout Gospels] | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gnostic/gnosticizing |

¹ Offshoots of Christianity take different views of the atonement. A significant example is Mormonism, where the atoning work of Christ occurred primarily in the Garden of Gethsemane, and not on the Cross.

² This is a classification, not a denomination or distinct faith group. The Word-Faith movement understands that, based upon our faith, our words have significant power in themselves. We can visualize the ideal that we want or need, plant our faith in Scripture, and speak our want or need into existence. Representatives of this movement are Kenneth Copeland and Benny Hinn (who have both described Christians as “little Gods”), Marilyn Hickey, and others. Many of the televangelists fall into this category, and this has crept into mainline traditions as well.

³ It is worth noting that Roman Catholicism accepts that this is a *theory*, and not a formal doctrine.

Other Theories

Some other Atonement theories, not evaluated on the main page of this handout:

- Recapitulation Theory – on the Cross, Jesus turns humanity around from disobedience and back to obedience – reversing the effects of the disobedience of Adam and restoring us; see Irenaeus of Lyons’ *Against Heresies* III. This had a significant influence on Eastern Orthodox theology.
- Mystical Theory – technically a heretical theory, this states that Jesus defeated His own sin nature on the Cross.
- Commercial Theory – on the Cross, Jesus honored God by his obedience, earning an eternal reward that He passed on to us.
- Acceptance Theory – God has arbitrarily chosen to redeem those who believe.
- Scapegoat Theory – Jesus’s suffering and death was inevitable because the world was unable to accept the Incarnation of Jesus; he then became the final scapegoat. See the works of René Girard (his book *The Scapegoat*, 1982). James Alison expands on this in his work, seeing Jesus as the “last scapegoat” and that this is humanity’s scapegoating carried through to its climax; Alison calls for faith communities to resist the scapegoating impulse, and to bear responsibility, break cycles of blame, and empathize with others (*Raising Abel*, 1996).
- In Liberation and Solidarity Theologies – God stands with the oppressed; the Cross acts to free people from systemic sin and injustice (Exodus motif; Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 1972); Christ’s death unmasks oppressive powers (Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 2011); Christ identifies with the marginalized (Gutiérrez, Boff, Sobrino).

Modern Critiques

To expand the conversation, think about more recent conversations, including:

- Feminist & Womanist – these challenge violent atonement metaphors that justify abuse or suffering. See Joanne Carlson Brown & Rebecca Parker, “**For God So Loved the World?**” in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse* (1989); Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (1993).
- Postcolonial – these warn that substitutionary language was used to sanctify oppression. R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Empire* (2005).

Helpful Resources

Freely Available Online

- The *Atonement* article at the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (plate.stanford.edu), a peer-reviewed online source.
- *The Catholic Encyclopedia* at NewAdvent.org

Selected Books

- *Atonement: A Guide for the Perplexed* by Adam J. Johnson. T&T Clark, 2015. ISBN 978-0567254023. Also available for Kindle.
- *Atonement Theories: A Way through the Maze* by Ben Pugh. Cascade Books, 2014. ISBN 978-1620328538. Also available for Kindle.
- *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* by James Beilby and Paul Eddy (editors). IVP Academic, 2006. ISBN 978-0830825707. Also available for Kindle.
- *Approaching the Atonement: The Reconciling Work of Christ* by Oliver D. Crisp. IVP Academic, 2020. ISBN 978-0830851973. Also available for Kindle.
- *Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church* by Peter Schmiechen. Wm. B. Eerdmans-Lightning Source, 2005. ISBN 978-0802829856. Also available for Kindle.
- *What Did the Cross Accomplish: A Conversation about the Atonement* by N.T. Wright, Simon Gathercole, and Robert B. Stewart. Westminster John Knox Press, 2021. ISBN 978-0664265878. Also available for Kindle.
- *Atonement and the Death of Christ: An Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Exploration* by William Lane Craig. Baylor University Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1481312042. Also available for Kindle.
- *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* by Fleming Rutledge. Eerdmans, 2017. ISBN 978-0802875341. Also available for Kindle.
- *A Community Called Atonement* by Scot McKnight. Abingdon, 2007. ISBN 978-0687645541. Also available for Kindle.

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