

School of Theology – The Atonement

The meaning of the word Atonement

"Atonement" quite literally means "*at-one-ment*." The word comes from the Middle English phrase "*at oon*," which means "*at one*." It is the theological term for the work of Christ by which sinners are reconciled to God. It is not, strictly speaking, a biblical word, although the translators use it frequently.

The Hebrew word "kaphar" literally means to cover (e.g. the ark with bitumen); but figuratively to expiate, to placate or appease. In the sense of atonement: to cleanse, forgive, be merciful, pacify, pardon, purge (away), put off, reconcile.

The Greek verb "hilaskomai" and noun "hilasterion" come from the word "hileos" which means cheerful. These words speak of the restoration of a previously alienated, wrathful relationship to a cheerful, friendly relationship.

The Greek word *Katallage*, literally meaning exchange is translated *atonement* in Rom 5:11, and *reconciled* in Rom 11:15, 2 Cor 5:18-19.

The Greek words focus on the result of atonement whereas the Hebrew word focuses on the means of atonement.

There are many different images of atonement in scripture, not just one.

The biblical basis of the theories

Substitutionary sacrifice

"because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins." (Le 16:30)

"For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life." (Le 17: 11)

Note: The sacrificial animal was not punished by death in the place of the sinner, but for some reason the blood of the sacrifice was effective, as a substitute for the sinner's life, in covering the sin.

"Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear." (Isa 59:1-2)

"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isa 53:5-6)

"So I will establish my covenant with you, and you will know that I am the Lord. Then, when I make atonement for you for all you have done, you will remember and be ashamed and never again open your mouth because of your humiliation, declares the Sovereign Lord." (Eze 16:62-63)

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" (Eph 1:7)

"For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people." (Heb 2:17)

"Every high priest is selected from among men ... to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father." (Heb 5:1-5)

"When Christ came as high priest... he entered the Most Holy Place once-for-all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption." (Heb 9:11-12)

"But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him." (Heb 9:26-28)

"And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy. The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us

draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.” (Heb 10:10-22)

“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1Jo 2:2)

“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1Jo 4:10)

Christ the Victor

But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. “Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house.” (Mt 12:28-29)

“After Jesus said this, he looked towards heaven and prayed: “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.” (Joh 17:1)

“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified... We speak a message of wisdom but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing... None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” (1Co 2:2-8)

“When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.” (Eph 4:8)

“And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Php 2:8-11)

“He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” (Col 2:13-15)

“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” (Heb 2:14-15)

Christ the Ransom

Ex 30:12, Job 33:23-24, Ps 49:6-9, Isa 43:1-4, Mark 10:45, Cor 6:20, Gal 4:4-5, Tim 2:6

Restoring God’s honour – Anselm (Feudal context)

The following references talk of the honour due to God:

1 Chr 16:23-29, Isa 29:13-14, 58:13-14, Matt 15:7-9, Tim 1:17, 6:16, Rev 4:9-11, 7:11-12, 19:1.

The following talk of the honour given TO the Son:

Jn 5:22-23, Heb 2:9, Pet 1:17, Rev 5:12-13.

Note that nowhere does scripture suggest that Christ’s death was to restore honour to God.

Penalty Substitution – Aquinas

In Anselm’s and Aquinas’ theories the emphasis is on the price being paid *by* God.

Christ’s suffering was *more than sufficient* for all sin.

For scriptures see Penal substitution, below.

Righteousness apart from the Law – Luther

“The angel said to those who were standing before him, “Take off his filthy clothes.” Then he said to Joshua, “See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you.”” (Zec 3:4)

“Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no-one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of

observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.” (Ro 3:19-28)

“Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.” (Ro 5:18)

“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” (1Co 15:20-22)

Penal Substitution – Calvin

Christ took the punishment for our specific sins, paying the exact penalty.

In Calvin’s theory, the emphasis is on God’s wrath being appeased and His demands satisfied by the payment for sin being made *to* God.

The idea of penal substitution comes mainly from Romans 1-6 and especially from Paul’s summary in Romans 3:9-20. All have sinned in Adam (Rom 5:16,18), the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:24) and God’s wrath (Jn 3:36, Thess 1:5-9). Through baptism, we died in Christ, satisfying the requirement for death as the penalty for our sin (Rom 6:5, 8:3-4).

Sin is a violation of covenantal law, incurring God’s judgement (Rom 1:18).

Human sinners are judged guilty by God and deserving of death (Rom 6:23).

God shows His love by sending Jesus to take our punishment (Isa 53, 2Cor 5:21, Gal 3:10, Heb 10:1-4, 1Pet 3:18).

By His death and resurrection Jesus frees us from our punishment and offers us life (Rom 4:25).

Penal substitution is clearly taught in the scriptures, but Calvin interpreted this in a legal/philosophical way resulting in a number of unbiblical deductions, rather than in the context of God fulfilling His promise to Abraham – to bring blessing to the world through Abraham’s offspring.

Governmental theory – Hugo Grotius

If free pardon is to be extended to penitent sinners, some great measure must be substituted for the punishment of sinners that will uphold the moral government of God at least equally as well as the pronounced consequences would have done. The atonement is this governmental provision for the forgiveness of sins. In this theory, sin is not punished, but morality is preserved through demonstrating the seriousness of sin. Thus Christ’s sufferings were instead of the penalty, not the penalty itself, releasing us from God’s wrath against our sin.

In this theory the atonement applies only to the church, not to individuals. Faithful membership of the universal church brings its benefit, but it is lost if a person loses their faith.

“Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!” (Ro 5:9)

“and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.” (1Th 1:10)

“For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1Th 5:9)

Moral example theory

Rom 8:17, Peter 2:18-25, Heb 12:1-4

The scope of atonement – limited or universal?

Calvin argued that for penal substitution to make sense, God had to know the detail of every sin that would be committed in the future by all those who would ever be saved. All these were then specifically paid for in Jesus’ suffering. This is made possible by the doctrines of predestination (determining who would be saved) and foreknowledge (knowing what sins they would commit). But it also led Calvin to conclude that Jesus did not need to suffer for the sins of the damned – indeed, to have done so would mean that there was a double penalty for their sins: the suffering of Christ and then their own suffering in Hell.¹ Hence the Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement whereby Christ atoned only for the sins of the elect.²

Our understanding of the scope of the atonement has an effect on our assurance of salvation and on our evangelism and determines the significance of saving faith.

¹ Calvin *On The Eternal Predestination of God* p165–66

² Many writers claim that limited atonement was a later development to Calvin’s thought and that Calvin himself believed in universal atonement, but in his “Calvin’s View of the Extent of the Atonement” Dr. Roger Nicole proves conclusively that Calvin believed in limited atonement.

Evangelism

If Christ's atonement was effective for all, then we can confidently preach to all, urging them to faith and assuring them of God's forgiveness. But if only some are atoned for, then such preaching is impossible. We must instead urge people to seek God in the hope that they may be one of the elect for whom Christ has atoned, and commiserate with the utter hopelessness of the rest. Neither can we preach that God loves a person for whom Christ may not have atoned.

Universal atonement allows a person to know God's mercy and forgiveness in Christ before they repent and believe.

Limited atonement requires a person to repent and believe before they can have any hope of Christ's atonement being effective for them.

Assurance

Likewise, if we have put our faith in Christ's atonement, then can we be assured of our salvation? If Christ died for all, then yes! The cross and resurrection gives us the assurance that our sins are indeed atoned for. But if the atonement was only effective for the elect, then it is not to the cross we must look for assurance, but to our own election. How can I put my faith in Christ, if I do not know if He atoned for me?

Saving faith

The NT writers insist that salvation is by faith, just as it was Abraham's faith which was counted to him as righteousness. Peter preached that his hearers should repent and believe that they might be saved. In other words, the atonement was NOT effective in saving people all by itself. In addition to the atonement, faith is required on behalf of the believer in order to receive its benefit. But limited atonement makes no room for *our* faith bringing us into salvation. Instead, those who believe in limited atonement argue that the atonement *produces* saving faith in the elect.

Scriptures claimed to teach Limited Atonement

"I know my sheep and my sheep know me ... and I lay down my life for the sheep." (Joh 10:14-15) ³

"Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." (Ac 20:28)

"Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25)

"Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." (Joh 15:13)

"Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him." (Heb 9:28)

See also Matt 1:21, 15:24, Mk 10:45, Jn 17:9, Gal 3:13

Scriptures claimed to teach Universal Atonement

"John saw Jesus ... and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'" (Joh 1:29)

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (Joh 3:16)

"Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men." (Ro 5:18)

"For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." (2Co 5:14-15)

"... who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." (1Ti 2:4)

"... God, who is the Saviour of all men, and especially of those who believe." (1Ti 4:10)

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men." (Tit 2:11)

"But we see Jesus ... now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." (Heb 2:9)

"They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves." (2Pe 2:1)

"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." (1Jo 2:2)

³ Limited atonement is claimed in an argument based on John 10 thus: Jesus lays down His life for His sheep (v15), He loses none of His sheep (v28), not all are saved (Matt 7:14), therefore Jesus did not die for everyone.

Penal Substitution under attack as “Cosmic child abuse”.

In *Christianity* magazine Steve Chalke wrote,

“In *The Lost Message of Jesus* I claim that penal substitution is tantamount to ‘child abuse – a vengeful Father punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed.’ Though the sheer bluntness of this imagery (not original to me of course) might shock some, in truth, it is only a stark ‘unmasking’ of the violent, pre-Christian thinking behind such a theology.”⁴

Steve Chalke sees in Jesus’ teaching and example a rejection of wrath and retribution:

“It is interesting to note that in Jesus’ own explanation of his Father’s relationship with mankind, the prodigal son, the father is not presented as angry or vengeful or as seeking justice and retribution – instead he simply runs to greet his wayward child, showers him with gifts and welcomes him home. The father in the story is wronged, but chooses to forgive in order to restore a broken relationship – there is no theme of retribution. Instead, the story is one of outstanding grace, of scandalous love and mercy – how different it would read if penal substitution was the model of atonement offered... Then we come to Jesus’ teachings on anger (Matt 5:22) and retaliation (Matt 5:38ff). Is it not strange for Jesus (God incarnate) on the one hand to say ‘do not return evil for evil’ while still looking for retribution himself? Similarly wouldn’t it be inconsistent for God to warn us not to be angry with each other and yet burn with wrath himself, or tell us to ‘love our enemies’ when he obviously couldn’t quite bring himself to do the same without demanding massive appeasement? If these things are true, what does it mean to ‘be perfect... as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matt 5:48)? If it is true that Jesus is ‘the Word of God’ then how can his message be inconsistent with his nature? If the cross has anything to do with penal substitution then Jesus teaching becomes a divine case of ‘do as I say, not as I do’. I, for one, believe that God practices what he preaches!”⁵

Chalke has unfairly caricatured penal substitution as presented in scripture. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” (2Cor 5:19) is not child abuse, it is God Himself, in the person of Christ providing for Himself the means of our salvation. It is precisely because God has dealt with the problem of sin and given us His Holy Spirit, that we can and should show unconditional forgiveness to others, just as God has forgiven us (Eph 4:32).

If the cross has nothing to do with penal substitution, then it has nothing to do with our salvation, it becomes merely an accident over which Christ was victorious. We may not like it or understand it, but we have to bow to God’s word and accept it as a holy, righteous and loving thing for the trinity to do on our behalf.

Restoring the significance of the resurrection as Christ the Victor.

BBC R4, Thought for the Day, Easter Mon. 09, The Rev. Dr Giles Fraser, Vicar of Putney.

“Some Christians subscribe to a version of the Easter story that doesn't really give the resurrection anything much to do. For some argue that Jesus saves humanity on the cross, that it's on the cross that Jesus pays off the debt of sin that human beings owe to God. Now this is not a version of Christianity I subscribe to for many reasons - not least of which is that it treats the resurrection as a spectacular afterthought, giving it no real work to do in the overall scheme of human salvation.”

“In contrast, for many of the earliest Christian accounts, the story of Easter is the story of how Christ defeats the powers of darkness. Here what is going on is an epic battle between good and evil, with the love of God emerging triumphant over the powers of sin and death. On this model, the resurrection clearly has very important work to do. Indeed, it's the crux of the thing, for the resurrection is the ultimate expression of God's victory over darkness.”

“But too many believers get stuck on the cross, misled by the idea that Jesus' death is some sort of cosmic payback for human wrong. Not only is this theology too much about violence and retribution, but also, it never properly makes it to the resurrection and so to the good news that the love of God is more powerful than the forces of death and destruction.”

We can agree that we need a fuller understanding of the atonement than penal substitution, and that “Christ the victor” is a very important aspect. But we cannot reject scriptures that we find uncomfortable – though we should reject interpretations that have been shown to be inconsistent with scripture.

Recovery of Jewish religious context for penal substitution

N T Wright writes,

“It is with the Servant, and the theology of the whole of Isaiah 40-55, that we find the explanation for the otherwise bizarre idea of one person standing in for the many. It makes the sense it makes within the biblical world, the Old Testament world, within which the creator God, faced with a world in rebellion, chose Israel - Abraham and his family - as the means of putting everything right, and, when Israel itself had rebelled, promised to set that right as well and so to complete the purpose of putting humans right and thus setting the whole created order back the right way up. And the long-promised way by which this purpose would be achieved was, as hints and guesses in the Psalms and prophets indicate, that Israel's representative, the anointed king, would be the one through whom this would be accomplished. Like David facing Goliath, he would stand alone to do for his people what they could not do for themselves. It is because Jesus, as Israel's representative Messiah, was therefore the representative of the whole human race, that he could appropriately become its substitute.”⁶

⁴ *Christianity* magazine ‘Cross Purposes’, September 2004, pp. 44–48

⁵ “Redeeming the Cross” Steve Chalke.

⁶ *The Cross and the Caricatures*, N T Wright. Article, Easter 2007.

Jesus' explanation of His death...

“When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfilment in the kingdom of God.” After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, “Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” (Lu 22:14-20)

(See also 1 Cor 11:22-34)

The timing of Jesus' death is surprising. He did not die on the Day of Atonement as we might expect, which was the most important feast, signifying the forgiveness of sins. Instead, He died at Passover (which was the first feast of the religious year, in Spring, marking new beginnings, followed by firstfruits and the 7-day feast of unleavened bread). This surely very significant. In the meal which Jesus gave to the church to remember His work on the cross, He did not emphasise penal substitution, but deliverance (Passover) and covenant making. Jesus did not say, this is my blood of the atoning sacrifice, but this is my blood of the New Covenant. Furthermore, He points ahead to the consummation of His betrothal to His bride, the church, at the marriage feast of the Lamb. Perhaps we should consider how our remembrance of Christ's work on the cross reflects this Passover emphasis which Jesus' chose.

Christ has brought us into the promises God gave to Abraham.

“And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’” (Ac 3:25)

“The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” (Gal 3:8-9)

“If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.” (Gal 3:29)

We are urged to have great confidence in the New Covenant inaugurated by Christ.

He says “(for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God” (Heb 7:19). This is the New Covenant, in which “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Heb 8:12). “The gifts and sacrifices being offered under the Law were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper” (Heb 9:9). But now “the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanses our consciences from dead works, so that we may serve the living God” (Heb 9:14). “We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10), “because by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy” (Heb 10:14).

“Therefore, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (Heb 10:22-23).

Stephen Dolley

April 2009

www.marpleparish.co.uk/Resources/theology.htm