

# The Atonement

by Jay Long

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What is “the atonement”? We talk about Christ’s atonement for us, we hear sermons preached on it, but how many of us could really explain what it is. William Tyndale is credited with the creation of the English word “atonement” from the roots at-one-ment. This was his way of translating Greek and Hebrew words which expressed our reconciliation to God.

The Bible has much to say about how we come to be reconciled to God. It also makes clear that Jesus’ death and resurrection comprise the historical events that make our atonement possible. But how? How did the death of a Jewish man some 2000 years ago in a far flung corner of the Roman Empire atone for our sins and reconcile us to God? Many throughout the history of the Church have attempted to answer that question. And, indeed, much can be said about it.

The different ideas that are expressed today about how Christ atones for us are generally called atonement theories. I don’t really like the use of the word “theory” to describe some of these ideas, I would prefer to call them facets of the atonement, but to stay in keeping with convention I will use the term “theory”.

Over the next several posts, I will discuss some of the atonement theories which have been the most prominent in the history of the Church. These different theories, taken at their broadest level, are interrelated to one another, support one another and give deeper richness and depth to one another. They help us to enter into the unsearchable depths of the riches and mystery that is Christ’s shed blood. It is my hope that in reflecting on the meaning of the cross, you will stand in fresh awe of the wonderful glories and mercies of our God.

\*Disclaimer – This is a HUGE topic on which many, many books have been written and on which many more are sure to be written. That being the case, I have had to be very selective in what details I cover and which ones I leave out. I would love it if I could be more nuanced but then each post would be ridiculously long. If you have a question about something specific, please, post it in the comment thread or email it to me and I’ll be more than happy to flesh things out for you a bit more. Thanks.

# Moral Influence Theory

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Theory of the atonement that I would like to discuss first is the Moral Influence Theory. Briefly stated this theory describes the purpose of Jesus' life and death as being an example set forth for us to follow. Those who promote this theory tend to emphasize the love of God that is demonstrated in the death of Christ and that radical obedience to God is likely to bring us into conflict with the rulers of this world and yet we are still to be obedient, obedient even unto death.

The idea that Christ is our example is clearly taught in Scripture. Jesus Himself tells us to take up our cross and follow Him. 1 John 3:2 says "we know that when He appears we shall be like Him." We are also told in Romans 8:29 that "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son". It is God's purpose from the foundation of the world that we be made like His Son, Jesus. In His suffering, He sets a pattern and example for us to follow "Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow in His steps... When he was reviled He did not revile in return" 1 Peter 2:21,23.

These are all wonderful truths that, if we allow them to take root in our hearts, will transform us. If we take seriously the call to be imitators of Christ, we will humble ourselves as He did (Phil. 2:3-8), we will serve one another as He did (John 13:12-15), we will endure suffering with patience as He did (1 Thess. 1:6), and we will walk in love as He did (Eph. 5:1-2). It is a high and holy calling that raises our eyes from the world around us and fixes them squarely on Christ, in whom we find joy unmatched by anything else in existence.

Yet, there are those who promote this theory to the exclusion of the others. While, on it's surface, this understanding of the atonement is in no way contradictory to other theories, some stress that Jesus was *just* an example and nothing more. Jesus did not in any way pay for our sins or restore honor. According to them, man is not forgiven because of anything that Jesus did but because of what we do. If we begin following Jesus' example then God will forgive us. Our own righteousness is what saves us. But anyone who argues for such an understanding of this theory is preaching a form of Pelagianism.

For those who hold exclusively to this theory and specifically deny others, there is also the question of the uniqueness of Christ. If all we needed was an example then isn't it unnecessary for Christ to come? We have many examples of righteous lives. Look at John the Baptist's life. He too was utterly obedient to God, even to the point of death. Is his life and death atoning for us? And if not, why not, when all we needed was an example? Sadly, many *would* deny that Christ is necessary and would argue that good examples among other religions are also atoning for people following that religion.

But, if we intend to affirm the whole council of God given to us in the Scriptures then we cannot possibly agree this such ideas. Jesus says "No one comes to the Father except through me" John 14:6. Clearly, "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" Acts 4:12. This is because, as Scripture clearly states, Jesus *did* do something on the cross that no else can do. He is our passover lamb, dieing in our place (1 Cor. 5:7).

Attempts to cut this theory off from the rest, fail primarily because to do so is to deny major themes in Scripture. However, coupled with the other theories this one highlights aspects of Jesus' life and death that are important to us to keep before us and that strengthen us in our own times of trial. "Since, therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking" 1 Pet. 4:1. We can have courage, knowing that we are not abandoned and that "we do not have a great high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" Heb. 4:15. Jesus knows your struggles and, in love, rescues us from death, that in Him our joy may be complete.

## Satisfaction Theory

Posted on [June 22, 2011](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

The Satisfaction Theory is a theory of atonement that was developed by the scholar and theologian Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and is known for defining the work of a christian philosopher as "faith seeking understanding" and for his formulation of the ontological argument for the existence of God. But it is his satisfaction theory that I would like to look at now.

In this theory, man, by our sin, has offended the honor of a holy God. Because of our transgressions we own a debt to God, a “debt of honor” to use Anselm’s phrase. For us to repay this debt means punishment by death and torment in Hell. However, Anselm argues that it is unfitting for God’s creatures to not fulfill the purpose He created them for, which is happiness and enjoyment of Himself. So, God’s honor must be restored and only man can restore it by paying back what is owed, yet to pay it back would frustrate God’s intentions for humanity. To solve this dilemma, Jesus became a man and died to pay back the debt of honor, allowing us to be in fellowship with God once more.

For most people today, Anselm’s language of restoring honor seems strange and, well, medieval. It arouses images of feudal lords and knights and honor duels. But honor is not so far removed from us as we might think. Honor is quite literally defined by respect and respect is something that is still very important to us today. Many people work hard to earn respect. Sometimes we defer to others out of respect. Some even attempt to demand respect. If respect or honor is something that we desire to have ourselves and if we acknowledge that it is right to treat others with respect, then how much more right and fitting and proper is it that we respect or honor God.

The Bible speaks frequently about honor. In the English Standard Version, “honor” is used 130 times. Different places in Scripture command us to honor God. “But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy” Isa. 8:13. “but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy” 1 Pet. 3:15. “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power” Rev. 4:11. We sin when we do not give the Lord the honor He deserves.

Even earthly kings rightfully expect a degree of honor to accompany their position. How much more for a heavenly King. And the Lord is our King, our Sovereign, who sits enthroned on high in majesty. He speaks worlds into existence. He gives a word of command and it is accomplished. Radiance and beauty and light flow down from His throne and engulf those found in His presence as a river overflows its banks into a flood plain. To stand before our God is to stand in awe. Even the angels who are in His presence are so overwhelmed by His glories and goodness, they are helpless but to fall before Him crying “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God almighty!” And they never tire of offering adoration. Day and night they praise the One seated on the throne.

We were made for this sort of worship. In giving honor and praise to our Sovereign, we find ourselves more filled with ecstatic joy than in any other activity that we can engage in, in all the universe. In those rare moments here on Earth when we break into the presence of our God and, with hearts purified by the blood of Christ, are given a vision of the splendor of His holiness, praises lift from our lips as effortlessly as embers floating from the flames of the altar of sacrifice.

The Satisfaction Theory reminds us of the fact that the Lord deserves our honor. Sin steals from God the honor He is due and steals from us His presence and the joy that accompanies it. As Jesus' death sets all things right and settles all accounts, we are once again able to offer our Sovereign Lord a sacrifice of praise, honoring and glorifying His name.

## **Christus Victor/Ransom theory**

Posted on [June 27, 2011](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

The Ransom theory and the Christus Victor theory are often listed separately from one another when atonement theories are discussed but they are closely related. Christus Victor was first articulated by Gustaf Aulen in 1931. He started with the Ransom theory (which can be traced back to certain Church Fathers) and modified it slightly to come up with the theory he called Christus Victor, Latin for Christ is Victorious.

The Ransom theory taught that because of Adam and Eve's sin all mankind was given into the possession of Satan. We were in bondage to sin, death, and the ruling spirits of this present age. God set out to make a deal with Satan to free man and to take them to be His own possession. The price that was settled on was Jesus' life in exchange for the lives of all mankind. Jesus' death, then, was the ransom that was paid to Satan to set his prisoners free, like ransom money paid to a kidnapper.

So, Jesus took the form of a man, and willingly laid down His life to pay this ransom. Satan released all those he held in bondage and gloated over his new prisoner. However, he wasn't able to gloat long, because not even the grave could hold the Son of God. Under His own power, Jesus broke free from the bondage to which He had subjected Himself and rose from the grave, victoriously triumphing over sin, death, and Satan.

Now, some of you may be thinking, “That doesn’t sound quite like what I remember reading in my Bible”, and you would have good reason to think so. While the Bible does speak of Christ’s death as a ransom (Mark 10:45, 1 Tim. 2:6, Rev. 5:9), it says nothing about a deal being made with Satan or that Satan has any rightful authority to be able to demand a ransom be paid to him. Gustaf Aulen also thought that this was a problematic element in the Ransom theory, so he removed it to create the Christus Victor theory.

Christus Victor emphasizes two major elements of the Ransom Theory. First, that we are in bondage to sin, death, and the Devil. We are prisoners and can’t set ourselves free. Second, that Jesus “pays the price” by His death to set us free from every evil power that holds us captive and wins us back to Himself. There is no mention of to whom the ransom price is paid but it is denied that it is paid to Satan. Satan is a defeated foe, not a bargaining partner.

This model does a very good job of focusing our attention on the spiritual battle that is taking place around us and in us. The “cosmic powers over this present darkness” Eph. 6:12 have spread their forces to every corner of this universe. They are an invading army that have lead an insurrection against the rightful King and Sovereign of all creation. We are the spoils of war. We are prisoners, lead in chains by the “spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places”.

While it seemed as if all would be lost and creation forever subjected to futility, yet there was still hope. Messages were sent from the True King of a rescue mission, a Messiah, who was to come and set the captives free. Then, after years of waiting and yearning for this Champion to come, He finally did. Like a commando, He clothed Himself in camouflage, being born in the likeness of men, and when the right time came He turned the Enemy’s own weapons against him. Through death, Jesus defeated death. He crushed the head of the serpent. With sin and death and the Devil defeated, Jesus rose from the grave victorious and lead to freedom all the captives.

Now, we rejoice in a risen Lord who will have all “His enemies placed as a footstool under His feet”. We rejoice in a Messiah, King of all, who “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame”. We rejoice in a Lamb who was “slain and by His blood ransomed people for God”. Our King is alive! Our King has won the victory! For this, we rejoice.

# Penal Substitution Theory

Posted on [July 2, 2011](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

The last atonement theory that I'll be looking at is the Penal Substitution Theory. This theory is the most commonly held of all of the atonement theories, both in the contemporary Church today and throughout the history of the Church. Some attribute it to the writings of Reformers such as Luther and Calvin, but the major elements of the penal substitutionary model can be traced back to the Church Father's and, of course, to the writings of the Apostles themselves in Scripture.

This theory teaches that when Adam and Eve sinned they brought a curse on themselves and creation. Sin entered the world through Adam and death through sin, therefore in Adam all die because all sin (Rom. 5:12). God has made clear that the wages of sin is death. This is the penalty of the curse that our first parents ushered into the world by their disobedience.

So, all mankind stands condemned before God. Our just punishment is death. God is just. Totality just. There is no hint of injustice in Him. He is holy. He is good. It is these attributes that require Him to make sure all sin is punished. God is also loving and merciful and kind, not willing that any should perish. So what is God to do? His goodness demands sin be punished. His mercy longs for reconciliation.

Enter Jesus. The second person of the Trinity took on flesh and became a man. He lived among men and was tempted in every way that we are and yet was without sin. When the time was right, He set His face toward Jerusalem and allowed Himself to fall into the hands of the Jewish authorities. After a short show trial, they pronounced Him guilty and, through the Romans, had Him crucified. While on the cross, the punishment that we all deserve was poured out on Him. Jesus suffered our punishment. He was our substitute (2 Cor. 5:21).

Jesus lived a perfect life and in His death He fulfilled the law with all it's legal demands (Col. 2:14). With death disarmed, stripped of it's power through the satisfaction of the law, Jesus rose triumphant from the grave, demonstrating that death had been defeated. So, in fulfilling the law, God is able to punish all sin and, because the law is fulfilled, able to show mercy on all who believe. In this way God is both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26).

This theory upholds the absolute righteousness of our God and the absolute wickedness of sin. It acknowledges our helplessness and need of a Savior. It doesn't brush over sin as easily ignored by God but rather faces the full weight of the consequences of breaking God's law. The dark and gloomy picture that is painted by understanding how little we deserved mercy and how much we deserved wrath, creates a beautiful contrast that allows God's love and mercy and grace to leap forward in bold colors.

God's love is so great that He would cleanse us of our filth by taking it onto Himself. God's love is so great that He fought for and even died for those who were in rebellion against Him. God's love is so great that He would allow Himself to be nailed to a rough roman cross and suffer the cruelties and excruciating pain of crucifixion for the sake of the very men who condemned and abandoned Him. God loves you more than you could ever deserve or imagine. It should come as great comfort to know that He loved you so much when you deserved it so little. The natural response to such a love is a humble heart, a life of gratitude and an unending song of praise.

One other thing I find remarkable about penal substitutionary atonement is that all of the other theories are either implicitly or explicitly contained within this one theory. God demonstrates His great love for us and is an example for us to follow in loving our enemies and persevering under suffering, just as in the Moral Influence Theory. God is a holy and just Sovereign whom we have offended by our sins and whose very nature demands that the debt be paid, just as in the Satisfaction Theory. God pays a ransom (to Himself, not to Satan) in Christ's blood to set us free, just as in the Ransom Theory. God is a triumphant Hero winning victory over sin, death and the Devil, just as in the Christus Victor Theory. Penal Substitutionary Atonement is rightly held by the majority of Christians today as their primary model of the atonement because all of the other theories are explained within and strengthened by a proper understanding of this one theory.

## **Penal Substitution Continued: Some Objections**

Posted on [July 8, 2011](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

At the end of my last post I said that I thought it was good that a majority of Christians held to a penal substitutionary view of the atonement. Not everyone agrees with me. There are some, and it seems as if their numbers are growing in recent years, that have criticisms of this doctrine. Some of

the criticism are understandable while others are overly harsh and based largely on a caricature of the theory rather than what it actually teaches. I would like to take a little time to answer some of these objections.

Objection #1: There *are* other theories of the atonement, you know.

Yes, of course there are. No one is saying that Penal Substitution is the only theory. However, many would argue (myself included) that a Substitutionary understanding is the most complete and actually strengthens the other theories (or facets) of the atonement.

Objection #2: Penal Substitution first developed at the time of the Reformation. If the Church didn't use/know about this theory for 1500 years then it must not be very important.

It is true that the Reformers wrote a good deal about this theory but it is not true to say that this is the first time these themes were discovered. From some of the earliest writings of the Church Fathers examples can be found of the major points of this theory. Specifically, the idea that Jesus suffered the punishment that we deserved (which is the point that most often comes under attack) is present in these writings. I will cite just one example because the full list would need a post all of its own (If you want more, email me and I will gladly send you the others). Eusebius of Caesarea wrote this in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century:

And the Lamb of God not only did this, but was chastised on our behalf, and suffered a penalty He did not owe, but which we owed because of the multitude of our sins; and so He became the cause of the forgiveness of our sins, because He received death for us, and transferred to Himself the scourging, the insults, and the dishonour, which were due to us, and drew down upon Himself the appointed curse, being made a curse for us.

It is true that this is not the only theory or facet of the atonement that the Church Fathers understood but it is incorrect to say that the Church did not know about or teach penal substitution until the time of the Reformation.

But more important than this, is whether or not this doctrine is taught in Scripture. Isaiah 53:5 says "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.” Rom. 4:25 says “[Jesus] was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” Rom. 3:25 says “whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood”. 2 Cor. 5:21 says “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Gal. 5:13 says “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us”. Heb. 9:28 says “So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many”. 1 Pet. 2:24 says “and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.”

I could go on but surely the point has been made. The bible clearly teaches that Jesus bore the punishment that we deserve.

Objection #3: The idea that God would punish His innocent Son is abhorrent. It is nothing more than “cosmic child abuse”.

This objection misses the fact that it is also Jesus’ wrath that is being suffered not just the Father’s. The Son willingly bore the wrath of the entire Godhead. More over it is all done out of love. In love the Father sent the Son (John 3:16, John 10:17-18). In love the Son came and put on flesh (John 10:10). In love Jesus placed Himself in the hands of those who He knew would crucify Him (John 15:13).

Objection #4: God doesn’t need a blood sacrifice to love us. Surely an omnipotent Being could find some other way to forgive us.

First, the assumption that God didn’t love us before the crucifixion is false. It was precisely because of His great love for us that the Father sent Jesus and that Jesus willingly took on flesh and died in our place.

Now, as to the idea that God could have done something else to redeem us. I suppose that might be true as far as it goes but what difference does it make as to what God could have done? God could have done many things differently. What we are concerned with, is what He did do. To that point, the Bible is quite clear, “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” Heb. 9:22.

*To be continued...*

## **Some Objections, part 2**

Posted on [July 13, 2011](#) | [Leave a comment](#)

Objection #5: The penal substitution theory is supposed to be about satisfying justice, but how is it just to punish an innocent man and let the guilty walk free?

Scripture uses two analogies that I think are helpful to understand how justice is served in Christ's death for us. One is that of the Church being the bride of Christ and the other is that of the Church being the body of Christ. If I were to take a wife who had thousands of dollars in debt, those debts would then also become my responsibility. It is because of our union in marriage that I am taking on the debts that she owned. This idea of union is also expressed in the analogy of the Church as Christ's body. Many times Scripture speaks of us being united with Christ in His death, and because of this union, we have access to His righteousness and life. (Rom. 6:5-11) It is because of our union with Christ that He can be said to "become sin" or to "take on sin" because He has no sin of His own.

Objection #6: Jesus taught us to forgive and to love our enemies but under this theory God doesn't forgive without first demanding punishment. Why am I asked to do something that God doesn't do?

The issue here is one of just authority. God has authority to exact punishment. We don't. What are we to make of Rom. 12:19 "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." This verse shows that in exacting vengeance the standard is not the same for us and for God, why would we expect issues of punishment and forgiveness to be different?

Objection #7: Penal Substitution is boring and to some people even offensive. Christus Victor is a much more engaging and interesting story. Why don't we just focus on the better story?

I like the Christus Victor model. There are many good points that it emphasizes. And you know what, everything that it teaches is also taught in the penal substitutionary model. The Substitutionary model teaches that the whole creation was affected by the curse and subjected to futility. It teaches that we are in bondage to sin and death and the ruling powers of darkness in this present age. It

teaches that Christ, in His death, gloriously defeated and triumphed over every power that held us captive. But it teaches more.

The Christus Victor model doesn't tell us *how* Jesus' death was able to defeat death. It doesn't tell us *why* it was necessary for His blood to be shed in order for the prisoners to be set free. If all you have to work from is the Christus Victor model it is unclear why Jesus even needed to become a man, why didn't God defeat Satan and release the captive while never leaving His throne in Heaven?

If the Bible were silent on these questions then we would have to be content with our best guess and admit that we cannot know with certainty the answers. But the Bible is not silent. We *do* know the answers to these questions because the word of God tells us.

"Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." 1 Cor. 15:54-57

"God made [us] alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him." Col. 2:13-15

See how closely the language of triumph and victory is tied to the fulfilling of the law and the canceling of our debt. The reason we suffer death is because of sin and sin is transgression of the Law, so if the Law is fulfilled, satisfied, paid, and completed then sin can no longer exact its punishment of death. Death, lacking the power given it by sin, no longer has any hold on one who is united with Christ in His death. The penalty is paid and the prisoners go free. Hallelujah! Death is swallowed up in victory! If that is not a good story, I don't know what is.

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There are other objections that I could have addressed but these are the most common. One thing that struck me as I was doing research on this topic was that among those who rejected penal substitution, there was almost no one who said that this doctrine can not be supported by Scripture.

Rather, their objection and rejection of the doctrine boiled down to some form of “I don’t like it”. It saddens me to see so many people overtly allowing their likes and dislikes to determine their beliefs rather than being a faithful student of the Scriptures and embracing all that it teaches. It is in plumbing the depths of Scripture and seeking to grasp all its truths, even those we might consider hard truths, that we find we will be transformed by what we learn. If we stay in the shallows of our own natural preferences, we will never discover the pearls that await us in the unfathomable depths of His richness. Those that allow their lives to be shaped by the hard edges of truth will find that they are being sculpted by the hands of the Master Potter into the very likeness of Christ.

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