

# THEOLOGY ROUNDTABLE



## *Atonement*

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# Introduction

“Atonement” as a theological idea refers to the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross. The question we are asking when we study the atonement is “how did the death of Jesus on the cross save those who believe in him?” The word “atonement” doesn’t refer to any one particular answer to this question. Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Protestants, Evangelicals, and Progressive Christians all believe in the atonement. But each tends to have a very different understanding of what the atonement means. Because the death and resurrection of Jesus lie at the heart of what it means to be a Christian, the doctrine of the atonement is one of the most important ones to understand.

The Bible uses many different terms to describe what happened on the cross. Each of these biblical themes shed some light on the nature of the atonement. The biblical survey section of these notes highlights some of the most common biblical ways of describing the atonement. Throughout history, people have attempted to fit the biblical metaphors describing the atonement into one cohesive system for understanding the atonement. These ideas have grown and developed over the long history of the Christian church. The theological survey section of these notes provides a brief description of some of the more significant ways of articulating the atonement.

Many evangelicals will recognize one particular way of understanding the atonement as closest to how they have heard the cross of Christ described. This is what theologians call the “penal substitution” model of the atonement. The basic idea behind this model is that on the cross, Jesus died as a substitute for humanity, enduring the punishment of death that was due to humans. This has been one of the most common ways of describing the atonement in the past century.

However, there are many other ways of understanding the atonement that are becoming more and more popular among evangelicals as well as other branches of Christianity. These ways of describing the atonement are evident in Christian music, preaching, and literature. Therefore, it is important to be able to understand these ideas and interact with them.

No matter which model of the atonement is believed to be primary, virtually everyone agrees that each model contributes some piece of understanding to the whole. For instance, the question is not, “does the atonement involve Christ’s victory over the forces of evil?” Virtually everyone agrees that it does. The question is whether Christ’s victory over the forces of evil provides the primary framework for understanding the atonement.

Some people already have fully settled convictions on how they think the atonement must be articulated. Others are investigating these ideas for the first time as a young Christian. Still others are dissatisfied with the way the cross has been described to them in the past and are looking for a more suitable way of seeing the atonement. Whether you are already convinced, investigating, or looking for a better understanding, I encourage you to think through these issues with an open mind, seeking to understand the different ways people have articulated what it means that Christ died for our sins.

Ultimately, all of these ideas are an attempt to describe the indescribable way that our God works. The purpose of all theology is to lead us closer to God, more in love with Christ, and more receptive to the Spirit. We study the ways of God so that we may be in relationship with Him, not so that we may have clever answers. May your study of the atonement lead you toward Him in rich and powerful ways.

Paul Taylor

# Biblical Survey

The Bible describes what happened when Christ died on the cross in many different ways. Some scholars have observed ten or more different metaphors used to explain the atonement. Listed here are five of the most common and powerful metaphors used in Scripture. Each metaphor comes from a sphere of daily life that people in the 1st century and 21st century are very familiar with. Taken together, the metaphors present a full picture of what Christ's death means.

## Reconciliation

Sphere: Relationship

Description: Our relationship with God has been broken by sin. Christ's death on the cross restores our relationship with the Father. We can come to God, the Father, in peace because of what Christ has done.

Biblical References:

- Colossians 1:19-20, *“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”*
- Romans 5:10-11, *“For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”*
- Ephesians 2:15-16, *“His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility”*

# Justification

Sphere: Legal System

Description: We have violated God's laws and have been found guilty. Christ's death on the cross removes the legal charge against us and presents us as innocent before God as a holy judge.

Biblical References:

- Romans 3:25b-26, *"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."*
- Romans 8:33, *"Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies."*
- Acts 13:39, *"Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses."*

# Redemption

Sphere: Commerce, Marketplace

Description: We are slaves to sin. God has purchased our freedom using the most valuable currency: the life of His Son. We have been purchased and now belong to a new owner.

Biblical References:

- Ephesians 1:7-8, *"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding."*
- 1 Corinthians 7:23, *"You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men."*

**Note:** Redemption imagery can also operate in the sphere of religion because the language of redemption was used so frequently as part of Old Testament religious practices.

# Sacrifice

Sphere: Religion

Description: God requires sacrifice to forgive sins. Yearly sacrifices do not suffice. Jesus died as the perfect eternal sacrifice which guarantees God's pleasure forever on his people.

Biblical References:

- Hebrews 9:14, *“How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!”*
- 1 John 2:2, *“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”*
- Ephesians 5:2, *“just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”*

# Triumph

Sphere: Military

Description: At the cross, Jesus triumphed over the powers of Satan, sin, and death. Because of Christ's victory, we are freed from the power of sin and can live a life of freedom with God.

Biblical References:

- Colossians 2:15, *“And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”*
- 1 John 5:4, *“everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.”*
- 2 Corinthians 2:14, *“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.”*

# Theological Survey

There are three main categories of theories that are used to describe the atonement. Since the death of Christ solved a problem in the world, each category of the atonement describes the problem of man's separation from God differently. Brief biblical references along with common criticisms of each category are listed. Refer to the additional resources for more detailed information.

## Victory

Problem: Evil has apparent (or temporary) victory in the world.

Solution: On the cross, Christ defeated Satan and all the forces of evil, once and for all.

Theories

- *Christus Victor*: Christ defeats Satan in a spiritual battle, outsmarting him on the cross.
- *Ransom Theory*: Christ paid the ransom to Satan for people's salvation.

Focus of atonement: Satan, who is defeated.

Biblical References:

- Matthew 20:28, "*just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*"
- 1 Corinthians 15:56-57, "*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

Criticisms

- Involves dualism: good and evil in cosmic battle.
- Doesn't address justice for sin.

## Transformation

Problem: People are broken and rebellious.

Solution: On the cross, Christ became a model to follow for how to live in obedience to God.



Theories:

- *Moral Influence Theory*: Christ's death proclaims God's love which inspires people to obedience.
- *Moral Example Theory*: Christ offers a perfect example of self-sacrificial obedience to God for people to follow.
- *Liberation Theories*: Christ is an example of an oppressed individual who provides a model for overthrowing contemporary oppressors.
- *Healing Theory*: Christ's death heals people from addiction to sin.
- *Recapitulation*: Christ becomes fully human to restore humanity as the new Adam.

Focus of atonement: People, who need to be changed

Biblical References:

- 1 Peter 2:24, "*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*"
- Romans 5:8, "*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*"

Criticisms:

- Doesn't account for original sin—people need more than an example to live in obedience
- People do need to be transformed, but that follows after the cross

## Justice

Problem: Man has violated the moral principles of God.

Solution: On the cross, Christ took the place of individuals, to satisfy God's justice.

Theories

- *Penal Substitution*: Christ suffered the penalty due to people to remove God's wrath.
- *Satisfaction Theory*: Christ's good life of obedience, even to death, made amends for people's sin.
- *Moral Government*: Christ's death demonstrates the seriousness of sin; the loving Father forgives freely.

Focus of atonement: God, whose demand for justice is satisfied

Biblical References:

- Romans 3:25-26, *“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.”*
- 2 Corinthians 5:21, *“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

Criticisms:

- God seems like angry father punishing child
- Jesus’ death doesn’t connect with themes from His life and ministry
- Jesus accepting unjust suffering can encourage cultural systems of oppression

## **Historical Development:**

Early church Fathers referenced Penal Substitution and Moral Example ideas in 2nd-4th century.

Ransom Theory emerges as dominant theory taught by Origen.

Satisfaction Theory in 11th century, taught by Anselm.

Moral Influence Theory in 12th century, taught by Abelard.

Penal Substitution during and after Reformation.

Moral Example during 19th century in liberal theology.

Christus Victor re-emergence in 20th century.

# Worship Song Quiz

This quiz is meant to be a fun way to recognize some of the theology that is present in our worship songs. Try to identify which theory of the atonement these worship lyrics have the most in common with.

## 1. Before the Throne of God Above

“Because a sinless Savior died, my sinful soul is counted free; for God, the Just, is satisfied to look on Him and pardon me.”

- a) Victory
- b) Healing Theory
- c) Satisfaction Theory
- d) Liberation Theory

## 2. Christ is Risen

“Christ is risen from the dead, trampling over death by death. . .”

- a) Moral Example Theory
- b) Ransom Theory
- c) Reconciliation
- d) Christus Victor

## 3. Jesus Paid It All

“Jesus paid it all, All to Him I owe; Sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow.”

- a) Liberation Theory
- b) Christus Victor
- c) Healing Theory
- d) Penal Substitution

## 4. Saviour King

“I give my life to honor this; the love of Christ, the savior king”

- a) Moral Influence Theory
- b) Healing Theory
- c) Ransom Theory
- d) Penal Substitution

## 5. In Christ Alone

“Til on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied. For every sin on Him was laid; here in the death of Christ I live”

- a) Penal Substitution
- b) Ransom Theory
- c) Satisfaction Theory
- d) Moral Example Theory

## 6. Your Great Name

“The enemy, he has to leave; at the sound of your great name”

- a) Healing Theory
- b) Christus Victor
- c) Satisfaction Theory
- d) Liberation Theory

## 7. The Stand

“So what can I say, and what can I do, but offer this heart, O God, completely to you.”

- a) Moral Influence Theory
- b) Christus Victor
- c) Penal Substitution
- d) Satisfaction Theory

Answers: 1) c 2) d 3) d 4) a 5) c [or a] 6) b 7) a

# Additional Resources

*Four Views: The Nature of the Atonement.* James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, editors. InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, 2006.

*Four evangelicals presenting different perspectives on atonement in conversation with each other. Christus Victor, Penal Substitution, Healing View, and Kaleidoscopic View.*

*Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement.* Gustav Aulen. Wipf & Stock Publishers : 2003. Originally published, 1931.

*The 1931 book that re-introduced Christus Victor into modern discussion. Aulen categorizes atonement into the three categories presented in these notes and elaborates on their details.*

*The Cross of Christ.* John Stott. InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, 1986.

*A classic articulation of the doctrine of penal substitution.*

*Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts.* Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker. IVP Academic: Downers Grove, 2000.

*An argument against penal substitution as the foundational model. Green and Baker argue that atonement operates differently in different cultural contexts, arguing from the New Testament and current cultures.*