**Theologies of Atonement: Some Historic Christian Models**

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Theologies of atonement begin with a sense that Jesus’ death really happened and that it matters. What does it mean that Christ makes us ‘at-one’ with God (‘at-one-ment’ which is a 16th century English word formed to capture the reconciling effect of Christ’s death).

All of the following models are just models. What the New Testament gives us is some words, some images, some stories, and a start at interpreting them. They take different directions, don’t agree, and don’t need to. The New Testament writings say, ‘Christ died for our sins,’ ‘Christ died **for us**,’ Christ is ‘the ransom for many,’ Christ’s death is the ‘expiation for our sins,’ Christ is ‘the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.’ And so on.

These are the raw materials, or ingredients, that theologians over the centuries have worked with, to come up with plausible interpretations of the death of Christ. Theologians weight the scripture texts differently – some emphasize John more than Paul, others uses Romans as the key to unlock the meaning of Christ’s death, still others look to Philippians 2 as a primary lens. So, it’s no wonder that there are different theologies. But what does this “for us” language mean?

Sometimes quite different understandings of atonement have been collapsed into one. And people may not even know that there are other ways of understanding the meaning of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection than the one they vaguely uphold. Others may assert that there is only one model or theology of atonement: usually, the substitutionary model.

Another point to make: in Christian theology there is wide universal agreement on who God is (triune), who Christ is (fully divine & fully human), and who the Holy Spirit is (true God, God the Spirit). This shared agreement is based on the ancient ecumenical creeds (and yes, Community of Christ’s doctrine of God, Christ, and the Spirit, cohere and align with these creeds). BUT: no ancient council of the Church ever said, “there is one model of the atonement and it’s the only true, model!”

Though there are quite different interpretations of atonement, there are some fairly consistent pieces all these interpretations have in common:

* Jesus represents God’s love
* Jesus’ death has meaning/purpose
* Reconciliation and forgiveness are inherent to what happens in Jesus
* Jesus’ death and resurrection point to a future reality
* All of the models are concerned about the divine-human relationship.

1. ***Christus Victor* (St. Irenaeus, St. Athanasius, and others.) –“Trick the Devil…Gotcha!”**

Using images from the New Testament, early Christian theologians like Irenaeus saw the human condition as one of bondage to personified evil powers: Sin, Death, and the Devil. Christ as fully human allowed himself to be swallowed by these powers, becoming a ‘ransom’ to them. But as fully divine he rose from Death and thus broke the evil powers’ grip on all humanity. In other words, he tricked Death and the Powers allied with it. Henceforth human beings are in a changed relationship with God; freed from bondage to fear of sin, death, and evil (which are now defeated), they are now freed to respond to God fully.

**Focus**: *Jesus’s death frees humanity from captivity to hostile*

*powers.*

1. **Substitutionary Atonement (St. Anselm): “A Price Required and Paid”**

This model comes from the 11th century and is the one most widely represented in Western Christianity. Based on some legal imagery from the New Testament and medieval cultural experience (such as codes of honor and fealty), Anselm argues that humanity has, through sin, incurred an infinite debt to God. Justice demands that this debt be paid by humans, but the debt is so great no human can pay it. Only a God-Man could pay it. For Anselm, this is what Christianity proclaims: Christ who is fully divine and fully human pays the debt through his death and restores the relationship between God and humanity. He fulfills the requirements of justice by offering ‘satisfaction’ to God, while also affirming divine mercy.

**Two Foci**: *1. Human sin must be punished.* 2. *Jesus the God-Man willingly paid the required price.*

1. **Moral Influence (Abelard): “What’s Love Got to Do with It? Everything!”**

In the 12th century, Abelard argued Christ’s death for us was God’s supreme act of love for the human race. As people see and learn of this divine act on our behalf, it awakens a responsive, answering love in us. Christ’s Cross, so to speak, morally influences us to a change of heart and a change of life’s direction. Christ’s love which kindles our attempts to love God back redirects our hearts and consequently our behaviors. In that dynamic of letting our hearts be changed, forgiveness takes place. Thus, our awakened love helps reunite us with the God who already loves us.

**Focus:** *The nature of God’s love revealed in Christ’s death calls forth our love.*

1. **Joining Us in our Woundedness (Julian of Norwich, ca. 1343-1416) –“Ditch Salvation”**

Julian (whose real name is unknown) was an anchoress, a woman hermit who lived in a small hut attached to St. Julian’s church in Norwich, England. In 1373, during a time of immense suffering in England and Europe, she experienced a series of visions she titled *Revelations of Divine Love*. Here visions were prompted by her gazing on a crucifix as she lay ill. In one of these visions she sees the human predicament depicted not as one of sin, shame, and guilt, but of woundedness. When human beings experience God’s love and call, they rush to serve God. But on the way, through no fault of their own, they have stumbled and fallen into a ditch. Injured and unable to see beyond the ditch, they lose sight of God’s loving gaze on them and are in despair. Christ’s life and death then, is like Christ climbing into the ditch with them. They find that God’s love incarnate (Christ) has joined them in them woundedness and will help them back to wholeness by reconnecting them with God’s unwaveringly loving gaze on them.

**Focus**: *Through Jesus’ humanity and cross, God’s love joins us in the ditch. This reveals that our woundedness can never separate us from God’s loving gaze.*

1. **Exchange (Martin Luther, 1483-1546) –“Christus Victor Remix”**

On the cross, Christ won a battle with death and hell (as in *Christus Victor* above). Additionally, as in marriage vows where rings are exchanged, Christ wants to give us all he has won for us on the cross: love, freedom, forgiveness, redemption, and life. In exchange, he wants to receive all that is ours: sin, guilt, fear, death, and judgment. Faith in Christ accepts this promise and is the “wedding ring” that binds our soul with him.

**Focus**: *In the cross Christ has taken all that is humanity’s and offers, in return, all that is his.*

1. **The Cross as the Revelation of God’s Suffering with and for Creation (C. A. Dinsmore, P. T. Forsythe) –“Love hurts”**

In the cross of Christ we see what has been true of God **always**: that God shares in creation’s ongoing suffering and travail. Dinsmore’s view (1906) is characteristic: “There was a cross in the heart of God before there was one planted on the green hill outside Jerusalem. And now that the cross of wood has been taken down, the one in the heart of God abides....”

**Focus:** *God has always shared in creation’s suffering, of which the cross is the reminder.*

1. **Christ’s Death Reveals the Divine Cost of Transforming Self-centered Humanity (W. Temple, 1881-1944) –“Soul Renovation”**

Human life is marked and marred by self-centeredness. God’s saving goal is to help selfish souls become loving ones. Divine love is needed for this to happen; God’s love shown in Christ’s giving of himself reveals the path from self-centeredness to Christlikeness. It also shows the cost of human selfishness to God. The cross further reveals that divine forgiveness, which is rooted in love and which alone restores human beings to intimacy with God, is neither sentimental nor cheap.

**Focus:** *Christ’s self-giving on the cross reveals the path from self-centeredness to love.*

1. **God Enters into the Hell of Human Suffering and Guilt (J. Moltmann, 1926 - ) – “God Goes to Hell for Us”**

Moltmann was a German soldier in WWII. When as a POW he learned of the absolute evil of the Holocaust, which he had unknowingly been fighting for, he felt like he was drowning in guilt and horror. As he read the Bible for the first time, he came to Christ’s cry in Mark’s crucifixion story. Christ’s words, “My God why have you forsaken me” resonated with Moltmann’s own despair. In this picture of Christ, he found a God who knew the depths of his guilt and shame. Decades later Moltmann wrote *The Crucified God* in which he explored what it meant that God the Son died on the cross. Moltmann held that in this event, God took all human suffering into the divine self. This action not only frees us from guilt and despair but also calls humanity to liberating action for the world.

**Focus**: *God willingly enters our self-made hells to bring freedom.*

1. **Christ the Ultimate Scapegoat Saves Us from Sacrifice (René Girard, 1923-2015, S. Mark Heim, 1950-) -- “Unmasking the Myth”**

Human beings in all cultures, times, and places engage in scapegoating: blaming others for what is wrong and then violently eliminating them. By becoming the ultimate scapegoat, Christ in his death frees humanity from the illusion that sacrificing others is necessary for achieving some social or public good. In the words of Heim’s book, through the once-for-all cross of Christ, we are “saved **from** sacrifice.” The cross “reveals what it is meant to end” (Heim, 328): scapegoating, victimization, and the sacrifice of others. The death of Christ is meant to save us from our worst human tendencies of identifying ‘others’ to blame, and instead calls us to be **for** others.

**Focus**: *Christ’s death shows the misconceptions behind sacrificing and scapegoating.*