

Common Theories of the Atonement

1. **Classical Theory** (associated with Gustav Aulen, Christus Victor)

- a. Christ's atonement is a victory over the hostile forces arrayed against Him.
- b. These are the "tyrants" which would bind man in sin.
- c. Christ breaks the power of evil that enslaves mankind.
- d. Aulen refers to Romans 4:4, 7:9, 10:4; Galatians 3:13; Colossians 2:14 as key texts for this formulation.
- e. Irenaeus (A.D. 175?) speaks of "Recapitulation" and Athanasius (A.D. 296-373) calls Christ "our representative."
- f. This theory is not problematic in what it asserts. It is not, however, a complete explanation of the notion of redemption.

2. **Ransom to Satan Theory** (McDonald, 141ff)

- a. This theory was originated by Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165) and focused on the conquest of the devil in the work of redemption, and ransom.
- b. It was elaborated further by Origen (A.D. 185-254), who also propounded the notion of the deification of man (McDonald 141ff).
- c. It was based on the fact that Christ's death is a ransom, and that He delivered us from Satan.
- d. Key Scripture references supporting this theory include Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; I Timothy 2:5-6.
- e. This theory tends to assume that Satan has some power or judicial standing that is not consistent with the biblical description of his role and authority.
- f. The idea of "buying back" is central to the biblical notion of redemption.

3. Commercial (Satisfaction) Theory

- a. This theory was originated by Anselm (A.S. 1033-1109) in an attempt to respond to Origen's view.
- b. He introduced the word satisfaction into theological discussion.
- c. The theory is worked out in Anselm's book, *Cur Deus Homo*.
- d. Key Scripture references supporting this theory include Mark 15:15; Acts 17:9; I Peter 3:15.
- e. According to Anselm, operating out of his feudal culture, we owe God either obedience or death.
- f. Christ was obedient, but He also died; thus, He paid twice.
- g. He is, therefore, able to apply credit to our standing.
- h. This theory tends to neglect the teaching that Christ's active obedience is imputed to us also.

4. Example Theory (Martyr Theory)

- a. This theory was proposed by Peter Abelard (A.D. 1079-1142).
- b. "It is evident that all this was done in order that He might show how great love He had for men, and so inflame them to greater love in return." (*Epitome*, 25, quoted by McDonald, 176).
- c. This view was commonly held by Socinians and Unitarians.
- d. Subjective sinfulness is the only barrier between God and man.
- e. God does not need to be reconciled; instead, man is in need of reconciliation. This theory keys on the idea that God initiates reconciliation.
- f. The death of Christ influences us to turn from our sins.
- g. The problem with this theory is that it takes an element of truth and expands it to become the whole truth. The fact that man needs to be reconciled is true - but not nearly as important as the fact that God needs to be reconciled.

5. Governmental Theory

- a. This theory was introduced by Hugo Grotius, a Dutch lawyer (A.D. 1583-1645).
- b. The theory keyed on Isaiah 42:21 which speaks of God's law.
- c. To forgive man without anything being done would negatively affect God's government.
- d. Therefore, God punished Christ to show He is serious about sin.
- e. Christ is used as an example and the cross does not constitute a full payment of sin. Instead, a realization of the penalty occurs.
- f. The theory holds to the idea of substitution, but not equitable substitution; it leads to questions about God's justice.

6. Moral Influence Theory

- a. Proponents of this theory were Horace Bushnell (A.D. 1802-1876), F.D.E. Schleiermacher (A.D. 1768-1834), and Albrecht Ritschl (A.D. 1822-1889).
- b. There is no principle in the divine nature that must be propitiated by Christ's work.
- c. Instead, the death of Christ displays God's love for man.
- d. This shames men to turn from sin and repent.
- e. The purpose of the atonement was not to satisfy divine justice, but to reveal divine love.
- f. Christ is not only an example, but a power of righteousness, who has entered into human life and revealed God to us.
- g. The problem with this theory is that it takes an element of truth and expands it to become the whole truth.

7. Vicarious (serving instead of someone else) Substitutionary Atonement: Satisfaction

- a. Christ was the Second Adam.
 1. He fulfilled the Covenant, Active Obedience (Romans 5:19).
 2. He atoned for Covenant-breaking, Passive Obedience (II Corinthians 5:20, 21).

3. “We must avoid the mistake of thinking that the active and passive obedience applies to the obedience of His life and the passive to the obedience of His final sufferings and death. The real use and purpose of the formula is to emphasize the two distinct aspects of our Lord’s vicarious obedience. The truth expressed rests upon the recognition that the Law of God has both penal sanctions and positive demands. It demands not only the full discharge of its precepts but also the infliction of penalty for all infractions and shortcomings. It is this twofold demand of the Law of God which is taken into account when we speak of the active and passive obedience of Christ. Christ as the vicar of His people came under the curse and condemnation due to sin and He also fulfilled the Law of God in all its positive requirements. In other words, He took care of the guilt of sin and perfectly fulfilled the demands of righteousness. He perfectly met both the penal and preceptive requirements of God’s Law.” Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 22-23.

G. Christ’s Death Was a Penal Satisfaction (A.A. Hodge, *Outlines*, 405)

1. The sufferings of Christ were not a substitute for the penalty of the Law, but they are the penalty inflicted upon the substitute.
2. It was not a pecuniary *quid pro quo*, but it was strictly a penal substitution.
3. It was not simply an example of punishment.
4. It was not simply an exhibition of love or another sentiment.
5. The guilt, or legal responsibility (not the depravity or corruption), of our sin was imputed to Him.
6. He suffered precisely the suffering that divine justice demanded He suffer in our stead.
7. His sufferings were those of a divine person in a human nature.