

ATONEMENT THEORIES

"THE ATONEMENT SHOULD BE MORE ADORED THAN EXPRESSED"

T.F. TORRANCE

WHAT IS ATONEMENT ?

Atonement refers to righting a wrong or reconciliation. In an act of atonement, obstacles are removed by way of payment to reconcile or repair something that was broken.

SIGNIFICANCE & RELEVANCE

In the Christian faith, the doctrine of atonement is the way the Church expresses the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. What it means and why it was necessary. In the Christian faith, we understand that through Christ's work on the cross, we are reconciled to God and one another, but the question becomes how, why, and what are the implications.

When discussing theories of atonement, it is essential to remember that they often work in tandem. One does not simply negate another. As always, it is wise to allow mystery and awe to remain at the forefront of our minds when doing theology.

This is for introductory purposes on the topic only. The atonement is a nuanced topic and often these theories work in tandem. God and his atoning work on the cross can't be fully expressed by human means, thus let us allow this conversation to hold God in awe and wonder as we draw closer to Christ.

RANSOM THEORY

This theory was one of the first major theories of atonement to be established. It teaches that the humanity and divinity of Jesus work together to "trap" Satan. Stating that Satan did not know Jesus could not be held in death, and thus his resurrection and inability to be held in death satisfied a payment or ransom. Jesus' death was accepted as a ransom either paid to Satan (most popular) death or God. This ransom paid by Jesus, paid off a debt all humanity inherited from Adam and Eve when they sinned in the garden of Eden. This theory emphasizes being "bought back" by the price of Jesus' death so that we may be reconciled to God.

CRITICISM

The criticism of this theory of atonement is that it is incongruent with the character of God. God never uses deception to accomplish his goals. Therefore, Satan would not be deceived, tricked, or "trapped." Moreover, this theory places Satan in the same power field as God by needing to be paid for humanity, which is problematic. Additionally, it leaves the reconciliation of humanity back to God in question. It may conquer Satan, but if reconciliation and restoration to God and humanity are the intent of atonement, this theory falls short of meeting those needs required by the work of the cross.

MORAL INFLUENCE THEORY

Moral Influence Theory teaches that Christ came, lived, and died so humanity could follow his example and live good and moral lives. Jesus brought the kingdom of heaven to earth, and when we live as he lived, we, too, are bringing a glimpse of heaven to earth. This theory is not to be confused with "self-help" moralism as this theory emphasizes that transformation, change, and following Jesus require the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This theory is less transactional than other theories.

CRITICISM

There is agreement that, as Christians, we are to follow the example of Jesus. There is only a minor criticism of this theory: it cannot stand on its own as it does not address the salvific (saving from sin) side of the atonement. This theory is typically held alongside other theories of atonement.

ATONEMENT THEORIES

SATISFACTION THEORY

The satisfaction theory, developed by Anselm of Canterbury, is based on the Medieval Feudal System to express atonement. This theory claims humanity dishonored God by disobeying him in the Garden of Eden. This disobedience broke the covenant God had with humanity. All humans then inherited this sin from Adam; therefore, all humanity required reconciliation and redemption to restore the covenant. It would be incongruent with God's character to leave the covenant broken. If God is the holiest in the universe, restoring the covenant requires something equal to his greatness. Jesus Christ is God, making him great enough to make the payment. Jesus is also fully human, which makes him the appropriate sacrifice as the restoration is with humanity. In this theory, humanity has stolen from God's justice by breaking the obedience covenant, and the atonement restores God's justice and the covenant.

CRITICISM

This theory expresses that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus satisfy something within the character of God, mainly his justice. However, this theory misses expression on the life of Jesus and the freedom from the powers of darkness.

PENAL SUBSTITUTION

The Penal Substitution Theory, developed during the Reformation, uses a legal framework to express the atonement. The word penal represents the legal system and stems from words meaning "punishment," while substitution is the idea that Jesus was the substitute for humanity's punishment. This theory builds upon the Satisfaction Theory in that Jesus' work on the cross satisfies a part of God's character, mainly his need for justice. In this need for justice, God's wrath must also be satisfied, which is why Jesus must be punished and die a brutal death. Jesus is punished instead of humanity to satisfy God's wrath and debt of justice.

CRITICISM

Criticism of this theory is that it leaves little room for Christ to identify with human suffering. It fails to acknowledge much of the life of Jesus and that his entire earthy life was one of suffering. Additionally, this theory paints God as needing brutal punishment to satisfy his wrath, which theologians argue competes with his character of love, grace, and mercy and thus prefer covenantal language to express the atonement.

CHRISTUS VICTOR

The Christus Victor theory advocates for a view of the atonement that demonstrates Jesus as victor over all powers of sin and darkness. This theory emphasizes that sin and darkness are in and around us. These things have power over humanity, and we are slaves to them until Jesus gives us freedom and victory through his life, death, and resurrection. Within this theory, it is our slavery to sin and darkness that is just as much a problem as our disconnect from God.

CRITICISM

The main criticism of this view is that it can be challenging to hold on its own and typically is held in conjunction with another view.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Bible Project, Sacrifice and Atonement: https://youtu.be/G_OIRWGLdnw

N.T. Wright on Christus Victor and Penal Substitution: <https://youtu.be/bGeSQbLD7a8>

Stephen D. Morrison, "7 Theories of Atonement," [SDMorrison.org, https://www.sdmorrison.org/7-theories-of-the-atonement-summarized/](https://www.sdmorrison.org/7-theories-of-the-atonement-summarized/)

Dr. William Lane Craig, "Dr. William Lane Craig Explains the Atonement and Atonement Theories," <https://youtu.be/S5kttGA7S0s>