



Biblaridion

Soteriology and Atonement theory

"No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him -- the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough" (Ps. 49:7-8).

I can't get no satisfaction

The church doctrine of atonement is a quagmire of quasi - legalistic theories that leave the believer dissatisfied and confused. Atonement theology offers no satisfaction, either to God, or to man – all the theories; ransom, penal substitution and moral exemplar are deficient. This should be very worrying to the church for it points towards underlying flaws in the doctrine of the Trinity, for the atonement cannot be comprehended unless the nature of Christ and his relationship to both man and God is correctly understood; it also highlights a deeper moral malaise that has afflicted Christianity, the tacit acceptance of violence. [\[1\]](#)

The Jews and the Muslims [\[2\]](#) have long since recognised what should be glaringly obvious to all thinking Christians; as long ago as 1263 Ramban (Rabbi Moses ben Nachmani) when disputing with Pablo Christiani asked the following question:

"And how stands it with your assumption that your Messiah redeemed the world from original sin? The penalties decreed for that sin still exist. Women still suffer pain in childbirth; in the sweat of the brow must the ground be ploughed, and Death still thins the hosts of the living-evils which, according to your construction of the Bible, result only from original sin."

I expect that Ramban is still waiting for an answer. Moreover, if put into practice the absurdity of the innocent being punished in order to forgive the guilty would soon cause outcry against the criminal justice system. [3] The notion of paying a "ransom" to the "devil" has also been rejected, and rightly so, for we might as well cut out the "middleman" altogether if God himself is beholden to the devil. The important question posed by Weaver remains unanswered, *"who benefits from Jesus' death; God, the "devil", or man?* Is the atonement necessary to repay a debt owed to God's law; to legalistically correct the debt incurred by original sin, or is it for the satisfaction of God's honour? The answer from scripture is perfectly clear – it is neither to repay debt, nor to satisfy honour, or to correct for original sin, **but in order to save man and is motivated by love.**

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

A **free gift** has nothing to do with debt, honor or legalism – God's love towards his creature is the motivating force behind his dealings with man – **not divine wrath.** [4] To answer Weaver's question; man benefits from Jesus' death – God only benefits if that love becomes reciprocal.

Forgiveness of Sin?

If nothing else, the law taught that man required constant forgiveness in order to maintain any semblance of a relationship with God. Without divine intervention man remains alienated during his lifetime until he faces the final cutting off – death. Death is more than a retributive punishment; it is the natural consequence of being in a wrong relationship with God all our lives. Ultimately forgiveness changes nothing unless it is accompanied by the reformation of the sinner. Mankind is estranged from God in the very ground of his being and therefore requires more than the forgiveness of sin. Forgiveness of sin is only one element in a process of reconciliation, it is not the process itself, for forgiveness is fruitless without a fundamental change in the nature of the sinner. Man does not require a substitute for his sins – “to settle debt”, for humanity already settles the account in full by dying. We all collect our wages, we all receive what we have “earned” but this still leaves us in a state of estrangement. Paying the debt is not enough.

Why is the shedding of blood necessary for the forgiveness of sin? Leviticus uses the expression, “*he shall lay his hand upon the head of his offering*” ten times in connection with the sin and peace offerings. This suggests that the forgiveness of sin (or peace and fellowship with God) can only be achieved by the suppliant’s recognition that he deserves to die. The sinner identifies with the animal, thereby acknowledging that he deserves death – *there but for the grace of God, go I*. God can only forgive sin once the full implication of alienation is recognized. Did the animal act as a substitute for the man? No. It did not – it represented the man and his worthiness of death – the animal did not take away the man’s sin: God took away the sin and blotted it out; forgiveness was a free gift, granted after a full and frank admission of guilt and unworthiness.

It will, of course be argued that the sacrifices typified Christ – and this is true, but not as a substitute – as our representative. He is the lamb on which we metaphorically “lay our hands” – we identify with him through baptism. He does not die instead of us, but for us. The difference between animal sacrifice and Christ is that animals cannot be truly representative and therefore every single sin required the process of representation to be repeated with another animal – lay his hand upon the head – slaughter the animal –pour out the blood etc until the next time.

“For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? Because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins.” (Heb.10: 1-2)

We take particular note that the author to the Hebrews uses the expressions; “*make the comers thereunto perfect*” and, “*no more conscience of sins*”, clearly indicating that we are dealing with more than just the forgiveness of sins.

“The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us; not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”
(1 Pet.3: 21)

“And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”
(Rom.12: 2)

Reconciliation

The death of Jesus is concerned not just with the forgiveness of sin, but predominately with reconciling the nature of God and the nature of man. Humanity could not achieve reconciliation without divine help, nor could God himself accomplish it without human agency, for God cannot be tempted, nor can he die. A new beginning was needed, a pristine creation, a means of incorporating the old into the new and completely transforming it – but still allowing man the dignity of freewill.

Behold the man – Jesus Christ, only God could create such a man – who bore sinful human nature, born of a woman, born under the law, but a man who was not alienated from God – who in the very ground of his being was one with his Father, one in purpose and one in character (not one in essence) – a man who had free choice, and the world at his feet. The Messiah had the power to grasp at divinity but, unlike Adam, chose to deny himself in obedience to his Father.

Such a man was put to the ultimate test of obedience, the complete denial of self, the absolute annihilation of that part of human nature that has always been opposed to God, that part of man that wishes to be self-determinative – to be like God –our ego. Instead he surrendered everything, even his life, demonstrating his unqualified faith in God's willingness to vindicate him by the resurrection. Death, the ultimate estrangement, was not allowed to separate him from his Father, for his whole life had been lived in accordance with the divine will. Death is the seal that is placed on a life of estrangement; it is the final separation caused by sin, however, the bands of

Sheol could not hold a man who was, for all intents and purposes, one with God. Only once the old nature is permanently put to death can the new nature emerge –like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis. Jesus’ victory was thus a victory for mankind, but one that was only made possible by God.

How did Jesus’ death achieve atonement?

Jesus certainly conquered death and reconciled his own humanity with divine nature, but how is his victory transferable to us? It is only achievable by total identification with Christ. God has given back to us what Adam lost – the ability to chose – the choice to remain “in Adam” or to “put on Christ.”

The Messiah, Jesus Christ, becomes our representative and our new federal head. [5] Christ embodies the potential in every human being to love God wholly and absolutely, but in our case this is only realizable with God’s help. We begin our “new life” not by laying our hands on the head of the sacrificial victim, but by baptism. Baptism symbolizes our inclusive identification with the death and resurrection of Christ, baptism, taken together with the symbol of the Eucharist (eat my body and drink my blood) enables us to associate with him and eventually become like him, not in a supernatural transubstantiationist sense, but in our character (this is not through our effort but through the in-working of the Spirit in our lives). This identification with Christ is so intimate that the members of the Church together form the corporate “*body of Christ*” and in turn *should represent him on earth*. Baptism also signifies our recognition of death as a just punishment for our sins – but by identifying with Jesus we enter into a new relationship with God, “*the answer of a good conscience toward God.*”

Jesus Christ also fulfils the Old Testament role of the kinsman redeemer raising seed to all those who were dead in Adam. Only a near kinsman can

perform this task – one that is related to both God and Adam. Our inheritance in “Israel”, which was lost in Adam, has been gained in Christ. The implication of representation (instead of substitution) is that when we look at the face of Jesus we “see God” and when God looks upon the face of Jesus he sees you and me – the best we could ever hope to be. Jesus’ love for his Father becomes *our love for the Father*; God’s love for his Son becomes *his love for us*. Baptism is then not just an outward token of identification with our new federal head, it is also a sign of “new birth” we become “sons and daughters” of the living God – the “seed” that is raised to the dead (for we were dead in our sins) by the “kinsman redeemer.” Jesus represents us and we become one with him by an act of faith – God faithfully accepts us and reconciles us to himself through Christ. Christ becomes the mediator of a new covenant – a covenant of faith; and what a perfect mediator – no principality, power or angel can represent us before the Father as he does.

Atonement theology tends to focus on the death of Jesus and not on the resurrection – for the victory of Christ did not end in death but in new life. New life requires a new “breath of life” and it is only through the promise of the Spirit that the transformation of the believer can be completed.

The horror of crucifixion

The crucifixion was a horrible painful affair that brought suffering to an innocent victim. Penal Substitution atonement theology understands this as the exercising of God’s wrath against sinful humanity (Christ put to death instead of us) and the “repayment of debt” the “satisfaction” due to either the divine law or divine honor. Feminist theology points out that this is a form of “child abuse” that establishes “victim culture” and promotes violence. Are they correct? The answer has to be a qualified affirmative – they are correct only within the confines of penal substitution theology. We must answer the following two questions: Did God desire Jesus’ suffering? Was there any point to his suffering? (Could reconciliation be achieved in a less agonizing way?).

Firstly, No, God did not want Jesus to suffer, took no pleasure in his suffering and no "satisfaction" from it. There is no intrinsic "merit" in suffering; God takes no pleasure in the death of a wicked man, much less in the excruciating death of his beloved Son. The Roman soldiers marveled that he died so quickly – he could have hung on the cross for three weeks and had his legs broken, but God did not prolong his agony. Men nearly always blame God for suffering, particularly when the "innocent" suffer; but the unpalatable fact remains that no one is entirely innocent and that creation itself is suffering the consequences of sin and alienation. God did not put Jesus to death – men put Jesus to death.

It is true that God could have intervened (as he can in every case of suffering- but where then is freewill and responsibility?), it is true that God, in his foreknowledge, knew the outcome of his Son's ministry (as did Jesus – but introducing the visible reign of God inevitably produces a violent reaction from sinners), it is also true that it was God's will that Jesus voluntarily "lay down his life" in the ultimate example of obedience. Nothing is impossible with God – yet it was not possible to "remove the cup" from the lips of his beloved Son. We understand then that God himself *was limited in what he could do because of man's sin* – Jesus had to voluntarily accept the consequences of sinful rebellion. Although Jesus' never suffered because of his own sin (for he was sinless) he suffered the consequences of the people's sinful rebellion against divine rule. Could Jesus have lived a sinless life and died in bed at a ripe old age? Yes, it is entirely possible – but in order to become the Passover lamb – the sign of deliverance; and man's new federal head, this had to be done openly –leaving all men without excuse. Moreover, the ultimate test of obedience is the love of ones own life – can anyone accuse Jesus of not loving God "*with his whole heart and mind and his neighbor as himself?*" Which man does not defend self when unjustly accused? Ultimate obedience is rooted in ultimate faith – faith that God would vindicate his cause. Proclaiming the kingdom of God would inevitably lead to confrontation with human self-interest and therefore to a violent death.

Secondly, was there any point to his suffering? Jesus never knew the true isolation caused by sin because he had such a close relationship with his Father and because he was sinless. In order to become like us in all things (except sin) he had to experience that feeling of utter desolation and abandonment that all sinners at times feel. Nothing brings the feeling of helplessness and forsaking home like suffering, especially unmerited suffering and casual violence. Possibly for the first time in his life Jesus knew the feeling of utter loneliness and abandonment. It was on the cross that Jesus experienced the full horror of sin, not his own sin, but the violence of sinful men – **but the effect was the same as if he had sinned.** For the first time he felt loneliness, pain, vulnerability and shame – the shame of the cross, crucified naked like a common criminal. Something it would have been otherwise impossible for the sinless one to experience – for shame is a consequence of sin. How did he react? Did he come down from the cross (which was entirely within his power); did he curse God and die? No. He committed his Spirit – his breath and life force (not his soul) into the faithful keeping of his Father – he experienced the same feelings of sin and the same death that every sinful man does. Yet, he did no sin.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ was the Son of God and the Son of man. He was not the pre-existent “God” of the Trinity. He was the perfect representative of God to man and man to God. He is our kinsman redeemer and our new federal head (if we so choose to identify with him). Unless the church rejects the corrupt doctrines that it has accumulated over the centuries it will never understand the atonement. How can the church preach the gospel to all nations when it is so far astray from the truth? The church needs to repent and put its own house in order.

Notes

[1] D. Weaver has the following to say in his critical essay:

“The analysis of this essay has demonstrated the extent to which presuppositions of violence and overt violence are inherently a part of classic Christian theology. We have also observed that the abstract and ahistorical character of the classic formulas of atonement and Christology mean that they do not challenge injustice in the social order. This combination of intrinsically violent elements and lack of challenge to injustice in the social order mean that it has been possible throughout much of Christian history for Christians to profess allegiance to Jesus and to claim salvation as depicted in classic Christology and atonement, while simultaneously pursuing the violence prohibited by Jesus' teaching and life. ” [page 7]

Note particularly his observations on the implications of this theology for the church:

“Satisfaction atonement accommodates violence in a third way. It structures the relationship between humankind and God in terms of an ahistorical, abstract legal formula. Thus it concerns a relationship that is outside of human history. Further, when visualizing the birth, life and teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus, quite obviously satisfaction atonement actually needs or uses only the death of Jesus. These elements--positing a transaction outside of history and involving only the death of Jesus--make satisfaction atonement an image that (with one exception treated below) implies little or nothing about ethics, and contains nothing that would challenge injustice in the social order. It is an a-ethical atonement image--it projects an understanding of salvation that is separated from ethics. That is, salvation in satisfaction atonement does not envision a change of status in history or in life on earth; rather it envisions a change in one's status outside of or beyond this life. This a-ethical orientat

ion makes it quite compatible with exercise of the sword, or with accommodation of slavery and racism. And as will be explained shortly, it actually contributes to one kind of violence in history.

The particular significance of these observations about the ahistorical and a-ethical dimensions of satisfaction atonement appears when they are considered against the backdrop of the changes in the church that are symbolized by emperor Constantine. These changes began already in the second century and extended through several centuries in evolutionary fashion. The end result of this evolution was that the church ceased being perceived as a dissident minority group and came to identify with the social order and make use of and express itself through the institutions of the social order. Rather than posing a contrast or a challenge to the social order, church officials could now use imperial structures as allies if political authorities sided with the particular officials on the issue in question. Of course they opposed them when the political authorities disagreed with churchly officials. There came to be a marked change in the status of the church. No longer was it a minority, oppressed structure. With emperors and lesser political officials now taking sides in theological disputes and backing the decrees of church councils, the church came to encompass the social order as a whole. A kind of culmination was reached when Emperor Theodosius made the results of the Council of Constantinople the official theology of the empire. It is the situation that is anachronistically called a "Christian society." Among other things, the exercise of the sword can represent the change in the status of the church from a contrast to an accommodation of the social order. Whereas before, Christians did not wield the sword and pagans did, now Christians wielded the sword in the name of Christ. Rather than defining what Christians did on the basis of what Jesus said or did, the operative norm of behavior for Christians became what was good or necessary to preserve "Christian society." And in determining what was good for society, the emperor rather than Jesus became the test case." [page 3]

Violence in Christian Theology - Critical Essay J. Denny Weaver (2001)

@ http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2096/is_2_51/ai_77674972/pg_1

[2] The *Qu'ran* sums it up succinctly: "Namely that no bearer of burdens (sins) can bear the burdens (sins) of another; and that man can have nothing but what he strives for; That (the fruit of) **his striving will soon come in sight; Then will he be rewarded with a reward complete;** That to thy Lord is the final Goal." (Q.53: 33-42) Of course, *Qu'ranic* theology teaches that people receive their just deserts - *we get what we have "earned."* The Bible is clear that the wages of sin is death –this is the only "reward" we can claim by merit.

[3] "*Justice surely demands that at the very least the guilty party -- [i.e. humanity] -- provide as much of the satisfaction as he or she can.*"

Michael Martin, "*The Case Against Christianity*," Temple University Press, (1991), Page 257 to 258.

[4] Fr. John Mabry views the Penal Theory as "*..an oppressive theology, and inauthentic in light of Jesus' teaching.*" He asks: "*how can a God who in Jesus told us that we were never to exact vengeance, that we were to forgive each other perpetually without retribution, demand of us behavior that God 'himself' is unwilling or unable to perform?...why can God not simply forgive as we are instructed to do, rather than mandating that some 'innocent and spotless victim' bear the brunt of 'his' reservoir of wrath? The ability of humans to do this when God will not or cannot logically casts humanity as God's moral superior. This is of course absurd!*"

<http://www.luckymojo.com/esoteric/religion/christianity/9606.vctrpnl.j3>

[5] Below follow excerpts from an article by S. M. Baugh on covenant theology; the complete article is worth reading; his presentation of covenant theology, as a framework for systemization is instructive (although we disagree with the Trinitarian dogma). Note how Jesus becomes **both a substitute and a representative – surely this is a contradiction he is either one or the other.**

It is a fundamental point of the Pauline Gospel: that Christ died on our behalf while we were weak and helpless (5:6), guilty sinners (5:8), and God's rebellious enemies (5:10). Christ hardly died because we were personally righteous and, therefore, deserving of acquittal at his judgment seat (cf. 5:7), nor did he die only after our renovation. The question should arise in our minds from this "on our behalf" -- as it does in Paul's -- how can there be this kind of exchange? How can Christ die in the place of someone else? "No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him -- the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough" (Ps. 49:7-8). [page 11]

How is it then that Christ could give his life in exchange for ours when no one else can do this for another? **How can Jesus Christ act as our Substitute?**

This is the thread in Romans 5:6-11, which Romans 5:12-21 picks up and answers, and the "therefore" in verse 12 makes the connection: Christ died on our behalf, therefore, we must see that the workings of this exchange is just as in Adam ... so also in Christ. In biblical theology, **this substitution is the act of a federal representative**, or using biblical terms, a "Mediator" or "Guarantor of the new covenant" (Heb. 7:22; 8:6; 9:15; 12:24; cf. 1 Tim. 2:5).

And finally, Paul explicitly denies the comparison of Adam's sin with our sin (I paraphrase): "death reigned ... even over those who did not sin in the same way that Adam did, by breaking a curse-sanctioned commandment" (v. 14). [Page 15] All sin is law-breaking (1 John 3:4), but our sin is not comparable **with Adam's because he was the federal representative of the whole race in whom all fell, and we are not.**

Paul carefully distinguishes between "sin" and "transgression" in Romans 5:14, which directly relates to a covenantal reading. Those who died from Adam until Moses did sin (v. 14; cf. e.g., Gen. 6:5, 11-12), but it was not like the transgression of Adam, because Adam was under a covenant of works sanctioned by a curse for disobedience: "In the day you eat of that tree you will die." That is the distinction between the pre-Fall Adamic period and afterward -- the covenantal arrangement was different. [Page 16]

This covenant with Adam demanded of him personal obedience and personally obligated him to keep all of God's holy law written on his heart as a creature made in the divine image (cf. Rom 2:14-15) and the special probationary commandment not to eat of the one tree. Adam was already the natural head of the race by the creation order (1 Cor. 11:8-9; 1 Tim. 2:13), but by issuing the commandment sanctioned by a curse for disobedience, God was displaying Adam as a special federal representative of the whole race. To a Jewish audience, the issuing of a death-sanctioned commandment was tantamount to the issuing of a covenant: "For the covenant from of old is 'You will surely die'" (Wisdom of Ben Sirach 14:17; II cent. b.c.; emphasis added). [Page 17]

S. M. Baugh, *Covenant Theology Illustrated*; Romans 5 on the Federal Headship of Christ

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@ <http://www.modernreformation.org/sm00covenant.htm>