Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 33 · Number 1 · January 2009

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by

Paternoster:
thinking faith

WEA
World Evangelical Alliance
Theological Commission

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

ERT (2009) 33:1, 19-31

The Gospel and the Achievement of the Cross

Mark L. Y. Chan

KEYWORDS: *Salvation, sin, atonement, substitution, victory, moral influence, glory, justice*

I The Centrality of the Cross

Central to Christianity is the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross and the resurrection of Christ formed the heart of the apostles' preaching from the very beginning (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2; 15:3-4)[1] and the belief that Christ died for the sins of the world is an inalienable part of Christian confession. While attributing Jesus' death to human wickedness,[2] the apostles nevertheless affirmed that the cross was no accident but an event that happened according to God's will (Acts 1:14-39; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 5:29-32). Over and above human intentionality is the outworking of God's redemptive intention through the cross (Acts 2:23; Heb. 4:3; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8).

Not surprisingly, the cross occupies a prominent place in the liturgy, writings, proclamation and missionary outreach of the church.[3] While much is made of the connection of the cross to the promise of salvation through Christ, one should not forget the relationship between the cross and our understanding of who God is, and the place it has in Christian discipleship, ethics, and missions.

1 See John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 17-40; James Denny, *The Death of Christ*, ed. R. V. G. Tasker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1951), 17-155; Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1965); and *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3d ed. (London: Tyndale Press, 1955, 1960, 1965).

2 The Sanhedrin and the Roman authorities converged on the political expediency of having Jesus executed. See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 540-611; and Scot McKnight, *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005).

3 Evangelical devotional literature and hymnody are full of references to the cross and the blood of Christ. Benjamin A. Pugh describes the phenomenon of 'blood mysticism' or the visualisation and verbalisation of the blood of Christ with a view to enriching one's relationship with God. 'A Brief History of the Blood: The Story of the Blood of Christ in Transatlantic Evangelical Devotion', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 31 no. 3 (2007): 239-255.

***Dr Mark L. Y. Chan**, (PhD, Nottingham), is Lecturer in Theology and Coordinator for the Faith and Society research cluster with the Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia, Trinity Theological College, Singapore. He is the author of* Christology From Within and Ahead *(Brill, 2001).*

II Biblical Perspectives on the Cross and Salvation

We understand the significance of the cross rightly only when we understand it within the overarching biblical framework of creation, fall and redemption. More than just individual forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God, the salvation procured by the crucified Jesus is about God's reordering of a disordered creation and the reconstituting of all things in Christ (Col. 1:19-20). The cross must be appreciated against the backdrop of God's redemptive activity in history, particularly in the history of Israel, in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus, in the preaching and teaching of apostolic Christianity, and in the present ministry of the church leading up to the second coming. In what follows, we will explore the salient features of a biblical understanding of Christ's work of atonement.

The disobedience of Adam and Eve introduced sin into the world and plunged humanity into a state of rebellion and alienation from God. Sin violates the sacred order established by God for his creation, resulting in the holy God turning away from humankind until something is done to blot out the offence to his holiness. Without this, sinners will remain hopelessly cut off from God. It is in the divinely orchestrated process of repairing this breach that we find the biblical history of salvation.

The calling of Abraham, the rescue of the Hebrews from Egypt, and the constituting of Israel as God's covenantal people at Sinai are part and parcel of the outworking of God's redemptive plan for the world. When the Israelites break the terms of the covenant and find their relationship with Yahweh severed,[4] they turn to the God-given means of making sacrifices for sin, namely the burnt offering 'to make atonement' (Lev. 1:4), the sin offering and the guilt offering (Lev. 4:20; 7:7). The word 'atonement' is used frequently to translate various forms of the Hebrew verb *kipper*, with many English translations linking the word to 'forgive' or 'pardon', with God as the subject (eg, Ps. 65:3; 78:38; Jer. 18:23). The idea of sin being purged or forgiven is therefore closely associated with the Levitical notion of making atonement.

In a slightly different vein, some scholars suggest that the idea of atonement is tied to the word *kōper*, meaning 'ransom' or 'compensation' (see Ex. 30:11-16; 32:30; Num. 25:10-13; 35:29-34; Deut. 21:1-9; etc). Arguably, the concept of atonement in the Pentateuch carries with it the sacrificial sense of purification, as well as the non-sacrificial sense of making payment of a price or ransom.[5] It is easy to

4 To be sure, the representation of the human problem in terms of a broken relationship with God is but one of many different ways the OT depicts the human predicament. Besides the relational, the human predicament is also portrayed as: disturbance of shalom, rebellion against authority, offence resulting in guilt that necessitates punishment, uncleanness and pollution, shame and disgrace, and finally death. See Christopher J. H. Wright, 'Atonement in the Old Testament', in Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker, eds., *The Atonement Debate* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 69-82.

5 See David Peterson, 'Atonement in the Old Testament', in David Peterson, ed., *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atone-*

get so tied up with the debates on the precise meaning of the different sacrificial rites mentioned that one misses the important point that sinners can draw near to God and enjoy his presence and promises only through the means that God himself provides. From the perspective of biblical theology, the OT sacrificial system foreshadows the all-sufficient and sin-bearing sacrifice of Jesus the God-Man on Calvary (Heb. 9:12, 14, 24-28) and furnishes the NT writers with the conceptual backdrop to articulate the significance of Christ and his work.

Significantly, God himself is said to 'atone' or 'cleanse the land for his people' (Deut. 32:43) when it is polluted. Even when the Israelites follow the prescribed rituals, the Lord is still implored to 'absolve' or 'atone for' his people (Deut. 21:8). God is therefore the ultimate source of atonement for sin in the OT sacrificial rituals.[6] Equally significant is the connection between the shedding of blood and the deliverance and forgiveness of God's people. We see this in the first Passover (Ex. 12:7, 12-13) and in the rituals of the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:1-34; 23:27-32), where the blood of a slaughtered goat is sprinkled 'upon the mercy seat and before the mercy seat' so as to 'make atonement for the sanctuary' (vv 15-16).

Turning to the NT, the fourth Servant Song of Isaiah (Is. 52:13-53:12) stands out as particularly illuminating of the death of Jesus, with the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 understood very early on in church history as prophetic of the atoning sufferings of Christ, eg, Philip's application of this text to Jesus (Acts 8:32-35).[7] The characterization of the servant in Isaiah 53 as a representative figure who is rejected (v 3), bears the guilt and sin of many (vv 4-6c, 12),[8] suffers undeservedly on behalf of sinners (v 8) even though he is blameless (v 9b), gives his life like a lamb led to the slaughter (v 7) and pours himself out to death as 'an offering for sin (vv 10b, 12) so as to bring healing (v 5), provides a ready scriptural grid to interpret Jesus' sufferings and death. The penal substitutionary nature of the Servant's offering of himself for the healing of Israel points ahead to the substitutionary death of Jesus. And it is likely that Jesus interpreted his own ministry and passion in terms of the suffering Servant (Luke 22:37; cf. Isa. 53:12 and Mt. 26:28).[9]

The Christological gloss on Isaiah 53 is representative of the attempt by

ment Today (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 2-15; Emile Nicole, 'Atonement in the Pentateuch', in Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III, eds., *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological & Practical Perspectives* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 47-50.

6 Peterson, 'Atonement in the Old Testament', 10.

7 See Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Recovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007), 52-67.

8 See J. Alan Groves' discussion on the meaning and significance of 'bearing guilt' in his 'Atonement in Isaiah 53', in Hill & James III, *Glory of the Atonement*, 76-89.

9 See R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1971) and the discussion in W. H. Bellinger, Jr. and W. R. Farmer, eds., *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), 70-151.

the NT writers to embed the cross within the OT narrative, taking into account God's antecedent work in Israel. In explicating the meaning of Christ's death, they appeal to the Hebrew scriptures and allude to OT events and concepts, all within the rubric of eschatological fulfilment. Jesus' announcement of the arrival of the kingdom of God in his ministry signals the beginning of the end. The covenantal promises associated with the 'day of the Lord' have begun to be realized in history in and through Jesus. God's plan of salvation for Israel—and through Israel for the rest of the world—comes to a climax in Jesus.[10] In their different ways, the four Gospels present Jesus and the cross as the means by which God accomplishes salvation, ie, takes away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29; Mt. 1:21) and brings 'forgiveness of sins' (Lk. 1:77).[11]

For the apostle Paul, the cross is the power of God to salvation (1 Cor. 1:18) and Christ is 'our paschal lamb' (1 Cor. 5:7). Along with the resurrection, the cross is central to Paul's theology, with the confession, 'Christ died for us', appearing in various forms throughout his writings (eg, Rom. 5:6, 8; 14:9; 1 Cor. 8:11; Gal. 2:21; 1 Thes. 5:10). The significance of the cross is expressed through 'a plurality of images'[12] and overlapping ideas: atonement (or propitiation), reconciliation, justification, redemption, sanctification, regeneration, etc. Paul affirms unambiguously that God has 'reconciled us to himself through Christ' (2 Cor. 5:18) by making him 'to be sin who knew no sin' (2 Cor. 5:21). Through Christ's atoning blood (Rom. 3:24-25), we have been delivered from the wrath of God (Rom. 5:8-10) and made 'the righteousness of God' (2 Cor. 5:21). For Paul, the meaning of the cross is rooted fundamentally in his understanding of the divine purpose, in God's righteousness, wrath and love.

The book of Hebrews bears sustained witness to Jesus' high-priestly work (2:17) of making 'purification for sins' (1:3) and his death as a once-for-all atonement for sins (eg, 2:17; 7:27; 9:25-26; 10:12). Hebrews insists on the sinlessness of Jesus (4:15; 7:17-28) and presents him as both priest and sacrifice, portraying his atoning work as the fulfilment of the Day of Atonement ritual. Through the shedding of his blood, without which there can be no forgiveness of sins (9:22), Christ made a perfect offering as our representative (6:20; 7:25), liberating us

10 See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996) for a sustained argument for rooting Jesus' messianic ministry within the context of God's salvific purposes for Israel, and through Israel for the whole world.

11 See I. Howard Marshall, *Aspects of the Atonement* (London: Paternoster, 2007), 34-52; and Joel B. Green, 'Death of Jesus', in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 146-63.

12 Joel B. Green, 'Death of Jesus' in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 203. For an overview of Paul's ideas of atonement, see Ronald Wallace, *The Atoning Death of Christ* (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1981), 32-51; and Peterson, *Wrath and Mercy Meet*, 35-47.

from bondage to death and the devil (2:14-15) and securing for us forgiveness of sins and an 'eternal redemption' (9:12). Because of the cross, Christ has become the 'mediator of a new covenant' (9:15; 12:24; cf. Jer. 31:31-34).

We find a similar understanding of the cross in the rest of the NT. Peter asserts that Christ's sufferings were anticipated in the prophets (1 Pet. 1:10-12) and that believers have been 'ransomed' with the blood of Christ, the lamb without defect or blemish (v 19). Christ 'suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous' (3:18) in order to bring us to God. Like his fellow NT writers, Peter alludes to the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 (1 Pet. 2:21-25). Through Christ's death, our wounds are healed and we are enabled to 'live for righteousness' (v 24; cf. Isa. 53:12). For Peter, the cross has ethical implications and behavioural ramifications, an emphasis also evident in John's letters, where to live right is to walk in God's light.

To those who fail to live in the light and fall into sin, John offers the assurance that the blood of Christ cleanses them from all sin (1 Jn. 1:9). Christ is the 'atoning sacrifice for our sins' and 'the sins of the whole world' (2:2). On this cosmic note, we turn, as John did on Patmos, to gaze at the dazzling Lord Jesus in the book of Revelation, the one 'who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood' (Rev. 1:5b). Jesus is consistently designated as 'the Lamb' whose blood has 'ransomed for God' saints from every nation (Rev. 5:9). Strikingly, Christ the Lamb is at the heart of the throne of God (Rev. 5:6), from where he receives the praise of all God's people, who stand righteous before God only because the Lamb was slain.

With that glorious vision of the final eschatological outcome of Calvary, we turn now to examine the multi-faceted achievement of the cross.

III The Achievement of the Cross

Unlike the Trinity and Christology, which received formal conciliar expressions in the Nicene Creed (325 A.D.) and Chalcedonian Formula (451 A.D.) respectively, the nature of Christ's atoning death has never been set forth precisely in a creedal confession, even though the substance of what Christ achieved on the cross is not in dispute within mainstream Christianity. The meaning of Christ's achievement on the cross has been variously explained by a number of metaphors or 'stories of salvation'.[13] Whether in terms of a sacrifice, a victory, a punishment, a ransom, a purchase, a legal vindication, or a cleansing, these metaphors seek in their own ways to make sense of the mystery of the cross.[14]

There are a number of theories of the atonement in Christian thought, with the main ones being: (a) the *satisfaction* theory of Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), which the Reformers

13 Stephen R. Holmes' expression in *The Wondrous Cross: Atonement and Penal Substitution in the Bible and History* (London: Paternoster, 2007).

14 Sometimes different images are found in the same passage, such as Rom. 3:24-25 where three are found—the legal, the slave market and the sacrificial offering.

developed into what is known as *penal substitution* atonement; (b) the *Christus Victor* model, after Gustaf Aulén's 1931 book of the same name; and (c) the *moral influence* theory associated with Peter Abelard (1079-1142). Much has already been written about the merits of these approaches, and we do not need to rehearse these here.[15] Suffice to say that not all theories of atonement carry the same weight despite the light that each throws on the subject.

Nevertheless, we maintain that there is value in enlisting the different metaphors in probing the mystery of the cross. The fact that there are divergent images points to the church's recognition of the complex and profound reality of what God did on the cross. No one picture suffices; all are needed, though not all are equally persuasive or important.

What then did the cross of Christ achieve? In tackling this question, we shall allude to the different theories as a foil for our exploration.

1 The cross reveals God's love to the world

The cross is at once the place of redemption and God's self-revelation; it is at once 'a word as well as a work'.[16] The revelatory word coming from the cross is about the *glory*, *justice*, and *love* of God. We shall look at these in turn briefly.

a) The glory of God manifested

Jesus' humiliating death is described paradoxically in John's Gospel as a 'glorification' (Jn. 17:1); in it both the Father and the Son are glorified (Jn. 3:14; 8:28; 12:32). The shameful spectacle of the cross may be folly to the world, but to the eyes of faith, it is the wisdom and power of God to salvation (1 Cor. 1:18). The lifting up of the Son on the cross represents a wholly paradoxical manifestation of God's glory.

b) The justice of God is revealed on the cross.

An oft-repeated challenge to faith is the perplexing question of why God seemingly allows the wicked to prosper and injustice to go unpunished. One way Scripture responds to this is to point believers to the future judgment of God. The other is to look back to the decisive judgment that has already taken place on the cross. The sins that apparently went unpunished in the past have now been judged on the cross, so that God is vindicated. By condemning the sins of the world in Christ, God shows his justice. Thus Paul maintains that on the cross the righteousness and justice of God have been revealed (Rom. 3:21-26). At Calvary, God reveals himself as one who will not condone evil, so that no one can accuse him of injustice or moral indifference.

c) The love of God profoundly expressed on the cross.

The cross is at once a statement about God's justice and wrath, and a demonstration of God's love for the world (Jn. 3:16). We know love because Christ has laid down his life for us (1 Jn. 3:16)

15 See James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds., *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2006)

16 Stott, *Cross*, 204.

as an 'atoning sacrifice for our sins' (1 Jn. 4:10). God demonstrates his love in the self-emptying of his Son, who 'became obedient to death' on the cross (Philp. 2:7-8). Such is the self-giving love of God on the cross that Moltmann, following Luther and late medieval theology, describes him as 'the crucified God'.[17] The God we see on the cross is not a deity who mocks our moral ineptitude, but one who, knowing our weaknesses, enters into our pain and pours himself out in sacrificial love, and in so doing extends to us his divine hospitality.

d) The moral influence of the cross.

Christ's exemplary death has led some to interpret its significance in terms of the power of its moral impact. Abelard, widely regarded as the first representative of what is known as the moral influence or exemplarist theory of the atonement, argues that God does not need any satisfaction, sacrifice, or ransom to forgive us. He can do so simply because he loves us. The reason Jesus went to the cross was to demonstrate God's love to us. As the ultimate expression of self-sacrifice, the cross teaches us how much God loves us and how we ought to love him and others in return. God's love demonstrated on Calvary should inspire us to embody that same self-giving love.

To be sure, God's love revealed on the cross is morally inspiring; Christ stands before us as an example of self-giving love. Paul appeals to the cross in calling the Ephesians to imitate Christ's love and live a compassionate life (Eph. 5:1-2; cf. 2 Cor. 5:14). Peter does the same in urging his readers to follow the example of the suffering Christ (1 Pet. 2:21; cf. 4:1-2). It is therefore understandable that one should emphasize the moral illumination and persuasion entailed in Christ's death. But to say that the meaning of the cross is exhausted by this exemplarist intent is surely reductionistic.

All Abelardian theories of the atonement are primarily subjective, and have no need for the objective sin-bearing dimension of the divine-human transaction. Jesus is presented as primarily teacher and example, and the traditional notions of justification, reconciliation, redemption, and the efficacy of Christ's death are interpreted exclusively in subjective terms. Conspicuous by their absence is the severity and extent of human rebellion against God, the violation of God's honour, and the reality of his wrath.

Christ's death may exemplify moral courage, but for his action to be meaningfully exemplary it has to be grounded in some objective state of affairs, and it has to be appropriately motivated. It is not enough to say that the cross is morally influential; one must enquire into *how* Christ's love is displayed on the cross. 'True love', Stott maintains, 'is purposive in its self-giving; it does not make random or reckless gestures.'[18] Nicole illustrates it thus: 'If I should die in attempting to save a drowning child, my action may

17 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

18 Stott, *Cross*, 220.

be judged heroic and exemplary. But if I thrust myself in the water to give an example to those present, my act will be seen as insane and far from a paragon of virtue.'[19] Insofar as Christ gave his life as 'a ransom for many', his action would challenge us to imitate him. But if his death were motivated simply by a desire to serve as our model, then it would not be exemplary.

2 The cross a decisive victory

Through the death (and resurrection) of Christ, God triumphed over sin, death, evil, Satan and all spiritual powers. What looks like defeat is in reality a victory; the crucified is in fact the conqueror. God placed all our trespasses on the cross and made us alive with Christ, and in so doing conquered death (1 Cor. 15:54-57) and 'disarmed the rulers and authorities' (Col. 2:13-15; cf. 1 Jn. 5:4-5; Rev. 6:2) so that we can be 'more than conquerors' through Christ (Rom. 8:37).

This understanding of Christ's death as a triumph is central to Gustaf Aulén's influential study, *Christus Victor*.[20] Aulén argues for what he calls the 'dramatic' or 'classic' view, whereby God in Christ dramatically battles the forces of evil and triumphs over them. This view of the atonement is 'classic' in that it was the dominant view for the first thousand years of church history. Aulén rightly emphasizes the cross as victory, for on it Christ not only saved us from sin and guilt but also from death, the devil and all evil powers (Mk. 3:27; Jn. 12:31; 1 Jn. 3:8; Col. 2:13-15; Heb. 2:14-15).

While the early church understood the atonement as Christ's victory, there was little attention paid to the way atonement works. To the question, '*How* is the victory of Christ secured?', the answer had to do invariably with some sense of redemption. Because of sin, people find themselves captives to Satan. In order to release sinners from this bondage, a ransom must be paid. Hence one way the early Christians described the work of Christ is in terms of the giving of his life as a *ransom*. Jesus characterised his own mission as one of giving his life as a 'ransom for many' (Mk. 10:45; cf. Mt. 20:28; cf. Job 33:24; Ps. 49:5-9, 15).

The word for 'ransom' (*lytron*) in classical Greek denotes payment made to free a slave or a prisoner, and its use in Mark 10:45 and elsewhere in the NT (eg, 1 Tim. 2:5-6; 1 Pet. 1:18-19) points to Jesus' death as a price paid to wipe out the debt of sin and set captives free from bondage to sin and Satan (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23; Eph. 1:7; cf. Col. 1:14 and Rev. 5:9). To redeem sinners, a ransom price was paid, though neither Jesus nor any other NT writer tells us to whom the ransom was paid. The NT is content to state that Jesus gave his life as a ransom without specifying *how* atonement is achieved.

With the payment of Christ's life as a ransom, Satan was defeated and Christ emerged victorious, with all who are in Christ partaking of that spiritual victory. To be sure, the consummation of this conquest on Calvary awaits the *parousia* (1 Cor. 15:24-28; Philp. 2:9-

19 Nicole, 'Postscript' in Hill & James III, eds., *The Glory of the Atonement*, 447.

20 Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (London: SPCK, 1965), from the original Swedish title published in 1931.

11). Meanwhile, through the ministry of the church, the victory of Christ is actualized more and more in history as sinners are transferred from the stronghold of Satan into the kingdom of Christ. Until then, we recognize that there is a spiritual battle[21] at hand and we must be vigilant against the schemes of the evil one (Eph. 6:12).

Paul characterizes his ministry as opening the eyes of those blinded by the devil (2 Cor. 4:4) and setting sinners free from his power. Salvation is thus understood as deliverance from the snare of the devil, which results from Christ's conquest of the evil one. It is the prior triumph of Christ that makes possible our freedom.

Aulén's arguments though are not without problems. His presentation of the development of atonement theology strikes one as being too one-sided; his suggestion that the early church was singularly committed to the Christus Victor theme is arguably an overstatement; and his critique of Anselm for failing to regard Christ's death as an offering from God to man and not just from man to God is certainly unfair.[22] Nevertheless, Aulén is correct to emphasize the cross as victory, and one may even argue that 'Christus Victor' can be 'a unifying framework' to understand the work of Christ.

We maintain that it is not necessary to differentiate too sharply, as Aulén does, between the satisfaction metaphor of Anselm and his preferred victory model. The two are not mutually exclusive, and just as the NT does not demand that we choose one over the other, we should embrace both of these as different yet converging perspectives. We turn next to the heart of what Christ achieved on the cross.

3 The cross turning away God's wrath

The idea that Christ's death was a ransom paid to the devil was robustly challenged by Anselm. In his treatise, *Cur Deus Homo*?, Anselm suggests that sin has so dishonoured God's majesty that satisfaction is necessary to repair the damage. Because God is sovereign, the insult cannot be simply brushed aside. And since the injury to God's honour is so great, only one who is God can provide that satisfaction; but since the offence is perpetrated by man, the satisfaction can be made only by man. Pulling these two strands together, Anselm argues that only one who is simultaneously God and man could make satisfaction for God's offended honour, hence the necessity for the incarnation.

Anselm's satisfaction theory of the atonement has the merits of taking seriously both the gravity of sin and the holiness of God. Unlike the moral influence theory, it emphasizes the objective satisfaction made to God. However, the stratified feudal framework on which his theory is based risks treating God like a feudal lord who is duty bound to uphold some abstract code of honour that is somehow objectified apart from him. Does such a view do justice to the biblical picture of God? Furthermore, apart from an over-

21 See Gregory A. Boyd, 'Christus Victor View', in *Nature of the Atonement*, 25; cf. his extended treatment on spiritual warfare in *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

22 Stott, *Cross*, 229.

reliance on medieval justice theory, the Achilles' heel in Anselm's theory is that there is no mention of any penalty for sin.[23] And there does not seem to be any necessary connection between Christ's death and the salvation of sinners.

Building on Anselm's view on the seriousness of sin and the need for satisfaction, the Reformers draw attention to the wrath of God and the curse that sinners labour under, and contend that the main obstacle to the restoration of humanity's broken relationship with God is God's righteous wrath against human rebellion. The only way God's righteous wrath can be appeased is through Christ taking upon himself vicariously the penalty that is due to sinners, and offering himself up as a perfect sacrifice to God on their behalf.

The penal substitutionary atonement is therefore premised on three biblical and theological ideas: human sinfulness and guilt; the holiness of God; and the sacrifice of Christ.[24] Penal substitution was a key element of Protestant Orthodoxy in the seventeenth century and the evangelical awakening from the eighteenth century on. It continues to be defended staunchly by many in the modern era who wish to see penal substitution as the controlling model for all articulations of the meaning of the cross.[25]

The belief that Christ was crucified *for us*, and ideas of substitutionary suffering are not new; they go back to the early church where we find references to the penal character of the cross among the fathers.[26] This *crucified for us* character of Jesus' death has clear scriptural support. Apart from intimations of this in the OT (eg, in Ps. 22 and Isa. 52), we find it expressed in, for instance, the epistles of John and Peter (1 Jn. 2:2; 4:10; 1 Pet. 2:24). Christ's death on behalf of sinners is often presented in the NT by means of the preposition *hyper* or 'for' (eg, Lk. 22:19-20; Rom. 5:8; 1 Cor. 11:24; etc). The blessings arising from his death are possible only because Christ has taken the punishment and guilt of sinners. Christ did not just die as our substitute; he bore our punishment or judgment as well.

Hebrews 2:17 speaks of Christ making 'a sacrifice of atonement

23 For Anselm, punishment and satisfaction are alternatives. Satisfaction is made not when someone takes the punishment in place of another; rather it is made when someone dies an obedient death and thus compensates for God's lost honour. In other words, Anselm commends substitutionary obedience, not penal substitution.

24 See Thomas R. Schreiner, 'Penal Substitution View', in *Nature of the Atonement*, 72-93.

25 Eg, J. I. Packer, 'What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution', *The Tyndale Bulletin* 25 (1974): 3-45, reprinted in J. I. Packer and Mark Dever, *In My Place Condemned He Stood* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007), 53-100; Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983) and Jeffery, Ovey and Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions*. Stott rejects unequivocally 'every explanation of the death of Christ which does not have at its centre the principle of "satisfaction through substitution", indeed divine self-satisfaction through divine self-substitution'. Stott, *Cross*, 159.

26 Boersma, *Violence*, 158-63. Not surprisingly, we have in the Nicene Creed the statement that it was 'for our salvation' that the Lord Jesus Christ 'came down from heaven…and was crucified also for us'.

(*hilaskesthai*) for the sins of the people'. Paul is unequivocal in describing God as offering Christ up as 'a sacrifice of atonement (*hilasterion*) by his blood' (Rom. 3:25). The meaning of *hilasterion* used here has been widely debated, with scholarly opinions divided. Suffice to say that there are persuasive textual, historical and theological reasons to render the word *hilasterion* as 'propitiatory sacrifice' in the sense of turning away God's wrath, rather than the more subjectively oriented 'expiation' with its focus on the cleansing and neutralising of sin.[27] Not that there is no place for the latter.

The imagery of sin being purged or expiated certainly has biblical resonance (eg, Isa. 43:25; Jer. 33:8; 1 Jn. 1:7, 9; Rev. 1:5b) and is an important concomitant to redemption. Be that as it may, expiation need not be used exclusively, and certainly not in a way that rejects the notion of divine wrath entailed in the concept of propitiation. On the contrary, we suggest that expiation and propitiation are compatible; defilement is removed when God's just anger against sin has been satisfied.

The word 'propitiation', from the Latin, *propitiare*, meaning to 'render favourable', was used widely in the pagan world with the sense of appeasing the wrath of the gods and winning their favour. The biblical view of the wrath of God though is nothing like the capricious vindictiveness of pagan deities who punish indiscriminately and must be bribed through appropriate offerings. Rather it is the wrath of a holy God directed at sin (Ps. 11:5-6; Jer. 44:4), which severs humanity's relationship with God. To satisfy God's righteous anger, Christ took upon himself our penalty, offered himself on the cross as a perfect sacrifice to God and turned away his wrath (Rom. 5:9; cf. 1 Thes. 1:10).

The wrath of God is as much manifested on the cross as the love of God. God is angered when he sees his good creation violated and evil visited upon the innocent and vulnerable. In the face of exploitation and atrocities perpetrated by evildoers, God cannot say to them, 'Never mind, I love you anyway'. To do so would be to make a mockery of his love. There are some things that God hates precisely because he is love.

The turning away of God's wrath is but one aspect of the salvific achievement of the cross. Along with propitiation, the other biblical images for salvation include: redemption, justification, and reconciliation. These complementary images take off from the foundational truth of Christ as our substitute.

We look first at *redemption*. Whereas propitiation focuses on averting God's wrath, redemption underscores the sorry state of sinners from which they have been ransomed by the cross. In Christ, 'we have redemption through his blood' (Eph. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:18-19). The imagery is drawn from the ancient world of commerce where the payment of a 'ransom' (*lytron*) secures the release of a slave. Christ achieved freedom for us through the heavy price he paid on the cross.

27 On the rationale for this interpretation, see Leon Morris, *The Atonement*, 151-176; and his *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 184-202. See also Stott, *Cross*, 168-175, and D. A. Carson, 'Atonement in Romans 3:21-26', in *Glory of the Atonement*, 119-139.

Through his death, we have been released from our captivity to sin and guilt. In addition, because Christ our redeemer paid for our release with his blood, he has proprietary rights over us. The redeemed are therefore bought with a price to serve the redeemer.

The substitutionary death of Christ overturns the verdict of condemnation and renders the sinner justified before God. *Justification* is a legal term signifying a verdict of acquittal. In Christ, sinners are found 'not guilty' and declared righteous (2 Cor. 5:21). The words justification, justified, righteous and righteousness share the same root word, *dikaiosyne*. Thus to be justified is to stand righteous before God. On account of Christ, the holy God will treat sinners as if they have never sinned. This justification is 'by faith' (Rom. 5:1), which results in our having a right standing before God.

A final dimension of salvation in Christ is *reconciliation*, whereby Christ's death changes the relationship between God and sinner from one of estrangement to one of communion. Through Christ, we have received reconciliation (Rom. 5:11), and from Christ we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. And even as Christians discharge this ministry, God is at work reconciling sinners to himself (2 Cor. 5:18-21). Reconciliation thus has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension: reconciliation with God and between people. Through Christ, all the barriers that divide people are transcended (Eph. 2:13-16, 18). This is first embodied in the Christian community, and then expressed in the church's ministry in the world.

The four key NT images of salvation canvassed above highlight on the one hand, the different aspects and magnitude of human depravity and need, and on the other hand, the saving initiative of God in giving his Son on Calvary. While the different metaphors of the atonement contribute positively to our understanding of the cross, we maintain that penal substitutionary atonement, with its realism about human sin, its acknowledgement of God's holy wrath against sin, and its affirmation of the sacrificial and substitutionary nature of Christ's death, is best suited as the 'normative soteriological theory' or 'unified theory of atonement'.[28]

IV Conclusion: Toward a Missional Atonement

The achievement of the cross is not simply a thing of the past; it continues to run its course today, for to be reconciled to God is to be entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-20). The experience of God's atoning grace should make a difference in the way Christians live and conduct their lives. According to Scot McKnight, 'atonement is not just something done to us and for us, *it is something we participate in—in this world, in the here and now*. It is not just something done, but something that is being done and something we do as we join God in the *missio Dei*'.[29]

One may quibble that McKnight's characterisation risks not giving suffi-

28 Alan Spence, *The Promise of Peace: A Unified Theory of Atonement* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006).

29 Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 30-31; also 117 (author's italics).

cient emphasis to the once-for-all nature of the atonement, but his call to embody the achievement of the cross in the life and ministry of the church ensures that the atonement does not remain an abstraction. One can insist on the 'it is finished' nature of Christ's work and simultaneously affirm the continuing work of Christ in the world carried out through his Spirit-empowered people.

N. T. Wright reminds us that the 'call of the gospel is for the church to *implement* the victory of God in the world *through suffering love*. The cross is not just an example to be followed; it is an achievement to be worked out, put into practice'.[30] What God does for us in Christ cannot be separated from what he does in us and through us.

This is in line with our affirmation at the outset that atonement theology must be grounded in the redemptive work of the Trinitarian God. The redemptive reconciling of the world in the Son is an ongoing work of the Father through the Spirit, who empowers the church to serve the divine purpose. Only such a Trinitarian understanding will ensure that what happened on the cross does not remain a past event, but continues to be a present reality that reconciles sinners and transforms the world.

Through the ministry of God's people, the cross continues to confront the world. One of the criticisms levied against penal substitution is that it encourages individualism by focusing on the guilt and forgiveness of the individual. Yet if we believe in the cosmic significance of the cross, then our atonement theology must lead us to engage the world at large. Those who carry their crosses are never blind to the social realities around them.

If the achievement of the cross is to be actualized in the world, then it is imperative that Christians and churches be thoroughly cruciform. The cross must move from being a part of the church's architecture or furniture, to being a part of the church's DNA. As article #6 of the *Lausanne Covenant* asserts, 'a church which preaches the cross must itself be marked by the cross'. As redeemed people bought with the price of Christ's blood, we are to mirror that self-sacrificial love that prompted our redeemer to give his life.

To exercise a ministry of reconciliation, the church as a community must embody that reconciliation in the way her members relate to each other. The cross, Luther reminds us, is the test of everything (*crux probat omnia*), and this is true not just in our congregational life but also in the message we proclaim. We must resolutely resist the temptation to dilute the scandalous message of the cross. Evangelism today cannot afford to bypass the scandalous yet wondrous cross.

---

30 N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 98.