

Atonement. Atonement, or atone, literally means “to reconcile” (at-one). Biblically, atonement refers to reconciliation between two parties through a sacrificial offering to cover an offender’s sin. Atonement blends the ideas of appeasing God’s holy wrath and His granting forgiveness through the sacrifice offered in faith. Atonement is tied closely to the notion of covenant, and both the Old and New Testaments deal extensively with it. While the Israelite had his sins atoned each year, the New Testament upholds the sacrifice of Jesus Christ as a “once for all” atonement (cf. Heb 9-10). Certainly, the atonement is the key to the Christian faith.

Old Testament. General Teachings. The OT generally expresses several notions wrapped up in atonement (verb *kipper*). Sometimes it refers to a “covering” or “mercy seat,” in reference to the place of propitiatory sacrifices in the tabernacle (Exo 35:12). Elsewhere, the term refers to “atonement” in particular, involving forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God (Num 29:5, 11). The related noun “ransom” (*kopher*) also connects to atonement, especially in Exodus 30:12-16, where a “ransom”-tax (*kopher*) was given to Yahweh “to make atonement” (*kipper*). In certain contexts the verb *kipper* actually means “to offer a *kopher*” (cf. Num 31:50; Gen 32:20).

Both Exodus and Leviticus are crucial to an OT understanding of atonement. Atonement was necessary to keep God’s holy anger from burning against sinful people (cf. Ex 32:10). In order for atonement and forgiveness to be granted, each Israelite needed to present sacrificial offerings. Clear instructions accompanied each type of offering (see Lev 1-6), and obedience to those instructions indicated faith (faith and obedience go hand-in-hand throughout the OT, as seen in Deut 10:12-13). It seems clear that “when *kipper* is used in the Old Testament to denote the making of an atonement by means other than the use of the cultus, it usually bears the meaning ‘to avert punishment, especially the divine anger, by the payment of a *kopher*, a ransom’, which may be of money or which may be of life” (Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 166).

Day of Atonement. One of the best examples in the OT for atonement occurs in Leviticus 16-17. There the high priest, Aaron, was to perform a special ministry of sacrifice to atone for the people’s sins annually (16:29). This day blended the Lord’s attributes of wrath and grace by dealing with His people’s sin while transferring such sin to a sacrificial goat. The high priest would cleanse himself before sacrificing “a bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. . . [to] make atonement for himself and for his household” (16:3, 6). Moreover, he would present two goats, one sacrificed as a sin offering privately and the other presented alive publicly and sent into the wilderness as a scapegoat. Ultimately, the burnt offering provided both a purging effect to cleanse the people from sin and “a soothing aroma to the LORD” (1:9, 13, 17). The sin offerings would cover/atone the people’s sins, and the scapegoat served as a substitute for their sins by removing them from both God’s presence and theirs, for “the goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land” (16:22).

The reason God offers atonement through sacrificial animals is because He says, “the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement” (17:11). Whenever anyone sinned, he had to bring a sacrifice to the priest to be offered on behalf of his sin to make atonement so that the sinner could be forgiven (cf. 4:20, 26, 31, 35). Therefore, at least annually, the Israelites’ forgiveness was connected to an atoning blood-sacrifice. The necessity of a blood-sacrifice for atonement and forgiveness climaxes with the witness of the New Testament.

New Testament. Numerous concepts of propitiation, sacrifice, substitution, reconciliation, and redemption flow out of the NT doctrine of atonement. This teaching covers a variety of authors and genre, as seen in the following examples: “the Son of Man [came]. . . to give His life a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45); “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29); “the church of God [has been] purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28); “Christ Jesus. . . gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed” (Tit 2:13-14); “now once at the consummation of the ages [Christ] has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (Hebrews 9:26); “Christ also died for sins once for all” (1 Pet 3:18); “Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for *those of the whole world*” (1 John 2:1-2); of Christ the twenty-four elders sang, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood *men* from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev 5:9).

Theories of the Atonement. Throughout Christian history, several theories have developed pertaining to Christ’s atoning death. These theories are attempts to satisfy the biblical teaching concerning Christ’s death and its relationship to sinners. Though multiple theories follow below, the penal-substitution theory receives the most space, because of the NT emphasis.

Central Theory—Penal-Substitution Theory. The primary theory of Christ’s atoning work is the penal-substitution theory, which highlights the gospel claim that Christ “died for our sins” (1 Cor 15:3) and covers the features of propitiation, substitution, and reconciliation. Though biblical in nature, the medieval roots of this view gained popularity from the satisfaction theory of Anselm (see below). The Reformers took the satisfaction notion a step farther by focusing on God’s wrath needing appeasement. Charles Wesley’s beloved hymn “And Can It Be” captures much of the penal-substitution view, blending divine mercy, grace, wrath, and love in the vicarious death of Christ.

(1) Atonement as Propitiation. At the heart of the NT concept of atonement is propitiation and Romans 3:21-26 is crucial in understanding this issue. The Apostle Paul has already established the universality of sin and God’s wrath (i.e., condemning righteousness) being revealed against sin (cf. 1:18-3:20). In response to man’s hopeless sin problem, the saving “righteousness of God has been manifested” and operates “through faith in Jesus Christ” (3:21-22). God set forth Christ “as a propitiation in His blood through faith” (3:25), a phrase saturated with meaning.

The Greek term for “propitiation” is hilasterion (cf. Heb 9:5, “mercy seat”). Related terms are the verb hilaskomai (Luke 18:13; Heb 2:17) and its noun hilasmos (1 John 2:2; 4:10). The key verses related to atonement from this word-group are Romans 3:25; Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10 (see below for explanation of 1 John). Hebrews 2:17 refers to Christ becoming human in order to serve as a high priest in making “propitiation for the sins of the people.” The OT imagery of the atonement is obvious, but Romans 1-3 provides the key to understanding this word-group (though C. H. Dodd argued for the idea of “expiation” rather than “propitiation” in these contexts, he fails to interpret Romans 3:25 within the larger context of God’s wrath against sin; see Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 145-178, which soundly defeats Dodd’s proposal).

Christ’s propitiatory work is satisfactory to God’s wrath on the one hand, because animal sacrifices were only temporary and could not ultimately serve in place of man by their very nature. On the other hand, Christ’s death provided man with the necessary and sufficient sin covering. Only a sinless, human, perfect, and eternal sacrifice could appease God’s wrath toward

sinner and cover their sins “once for all” (Heb 7:27; 9:12; cf. 9:26, 28; 10:10, 12, 14; Rom 6:10). The catch is this: God’s righteousness demands that sin be punished, but God’s public display of Christ as a propitiation for sin demonstrated that His righteousness is still intact (Rom 3:25).

(2) Atonement as Substitution. The Bible also declares that Christ’s atoning death was a substitutionary one—even penal substitution. That is, Christ bore the penalty of sin (God’s wrath) in the place of sinners when He died on the cross. Even though people deserve to die for their sins, God inflicted this penalty on Christ—“the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him” (Isa 53:6), “the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief” (53:10), and God made Christ “who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf” (2 Cor 5:21). Clearly, God penalized Christ in the place of sinners.

Additionally, the Greek preposition “*huper*” often signifies substitution, being translated as “for, in behalf of, in place of.” Thus, the Scripture teaches that Christ died “for our sins” (1 Cor 15:3), “on our behalf” (2 Cor 5:21), and “for the ungodly” (Rom 5:6). Moreover, a phrase like He “bore our sins” (1 Pet 2:24) communicates a vicarious sacrifice.

(3) Atonement as Reconciliation. Not only is Christ’s death propitiatory and substitutionary, but it also results in turning enmity with God into peace. Those who were naturally children of God’s wrath and separated from Christ “have been brought near by the blood of Christ,” which brought an end to enmity and established peace and reconciliation (Eph 2:12-16). Although God was not in the wrong, He performs the work of reconciling sinners to Himself through Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:18-19).

Additional Theories. Many of the following atonement theories hold some truth, but they are not the Scriptures’ primary teaching. It may be proper to label them as complementary theories. A few of the theories below certainly tip-toe close to heresy.

(1) Example. Historically known as the Socinian theory after it originated with Faustus and Laelius Socinus in the 16th century, the example theory centers on Jesus’ total love for God as necessary for others to experience salvation—“Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps” (1 Pet 2:21). Jesus’ selfless example of love inspires others to great heights, helping them fulfill the first commandment to “love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt 22:37).

While Christ’s sacrifice should inspire believers to surrender everything in loyalty to God, this view ultimately adopts Pelagianism, assuming humans are inherently good. The believer’s sin nature (cf. Rom 3:23), however, keeps him from having perfect love like Christ. Furthermore, this theory fails to consider the central themes of God’s holiness, wrath, and forgiveness inherent in atonement.

(2) Moral Influence. Originating with Peter Abelard in the early 12th century in reaction to Anselm, the moral influence theory highlights Christ’s death as the supreme demonstration of God’s love for mankind. Rather than exhibit fear and ignorance of God, sinners needed to know the magnitude of God’s love for them, known most plainly through Jesus’ atoning death. This view gained popularity in 19th century America through Horace Bushnell and liberal theologians, who stressed Christ’s empathy. Furthermore, Isaac Watts’ classic hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” focuses strictly on the divine love effect of Christ’s cross.

While pushing God's love from texts like John 3:16 and 1 John 4:8 too far, the moral influence view fails to incorporate God's holiness and wrath in the equation. This view teaches that God does not need to be placated, but Christ only needs to be obeyed.

(3) Governmental. Developed by Hugo Grotius in the 17th century, the government theory of the atonement sees sin as a serious offense against a holy God. This view underscores both divine justice and human deterrent to sin through Christ's death. The government theory teaches that a holy God hates sin and must punish law-breakers for the sinning. To magnify God's love, however, Christ's death showed that God loves sinners enough that He accepted Christ's atonement as a demonstration of His hatred of sin. God used Christ as a public example of the extent of His love in upholding morality. This view claims that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us" (Gal 3:13). The 19th century revivalist Charles G. Finney advanced this view of the atonement during the Second Great Awakening.

While this view treats sin seriously, it, too, falls prey to overemphasizing God's love. Whereas God's holy wrath plays a part in the government theory, Christ's death is not vicarious nor does it appease God's wrath.

(4) Satisfaction or Commercial. During the 11th century, Anselm offered the satisfaction theory in his book *Cur Deus Homo?* ("Why the God Man?"). This view developed out of a strong denial of the ransom to Satan theory (see below) in favor of a necessary God-Man sacrifice. The atonement, then, both satisfied God's sovereign honor, which had been insulted, and represented sinful man. This theory connects the incarnation to the atonement. It also views Christ's death as meritorious for the sinner. Being constructed from a feudalistic society, however, the satisfaction theory fails to consider God's mercy and forgiveness toward the sinner. One must note, nonetheless, that this theory helped pave the way for the penal-substitution view.

(5) Recapitulation. Developed by Irenaeus in the late 2nd century, the recapitulation theory teaches that Christ recapitulates all stages of human life in His life, including man's sinful state (see IRENAEUS). This view reverses mankind's disposition set by Adam. Christ, as the "new Adam," successfully undoes each of Adam's wrongs. By living a sinless life, Jesus Christ summed up and sanctified life by His deity. Irenaeus writes that when Christ "was incarnate and made man, he recapitulated [*or* summed up] in himself the long line of the human race, procuring for us salvation thus summarily, so that what we had lost in Adam, that is, the being in the image and likeness of God, that we should reign in Christ Jesus" (*Against Heresies*, 3.18). This view attempts to uphold Scripture: "Since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same. . . . For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted" (Heb 2:14, 18). Clearly, this view falls well short of the atonement's biblical teaching on subjects like redemption and reconciliation.

(6) Ransom to Satan or *Christus Victor* (Christ the Victor). This view teaches that evil spiritual forces oppress mankind. God bargained with Satan, the world ruler, by offering Christ's death as a ransom to free sinners from spiritual captivity. Christ's subsequent resurrection surprised Satan, resulting in Christ's complete victory over the evil forces. A key text in this discussion is 1 Corinthians 6:20, which says that believers "have been bought with a price." The question asked of such a statement is "Who was paid?" Several early church fathers, influenced by the likes of Ignatius, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa, among others, assumed God paid Satan,

and since God would not steal sinners back, He paid Satan for the rights to them through Christ's death.

This ransom theory of the atonement clearly has no biblical evidence. Since God is completely sovereign, even over Satan (cf. Job 1-2), He does not owe the devil anything. Since Scripture does not indicate the receiver of this ransom, it is best to remain silent. Finally, without biblical evidence, the ransom theory is a false view of Christ's atoning work, not because Christ is not victorious over Satan, but because God does not save in the manner prescribed by this theory.

(7) *Mystical*. The mystical view says that the atonement exercises a subjective transformation in man through the divine life entering him. Christ's death affects a deep change subconsciously. Basically, divinity entered into humanity through the incarnation, though Christ became a gradually purified human by the work of the Spirit in His life. Christ's death undid man's depravity and reunited humanity with God. This view denies both Christ's deity as well as man's sinfulness. The focus is on man's experience of and feelings about Christ's death. Introduced by Friedrich Schleiermacher, the mystical theory has no biblical support.

(8) *Vicarious Repentance or Sympathy and Identification*. Originating with V. Taylor, the vicarious repentance theory describes Christ's death in terms of representing man's need for perfect repentance. Furthermore, Christ's atoning work consists of vicarious confession of sin in man's stead. A summary of this theory "is that Christ, by His suffering and death, entered sympathetically into the Father's condemnation of sin, brought out the heinousness of sin and condemned sin; and this was viewed by the Father as a perfect confession of our sins" (Berkhof, 390). This kind of representative theory fails to explain the atonement in terms of God's holiness and is without clear scriptural evidence.

Extent of the Atonement. Another issue in this discussion concerns the extent of the atonement. That is, in light of the scope of the atonement, did Christ's death pay for the sins of everyone or only of those who would be saved? Moreover, how does the application of the atonement in one's life fit into this argument?

Scope. Two main views of the atonement's scope are limited (the Reformers' position) and unlimited (the position of Catholics and non-Reformed Protestants). Those from the Reformed tradition argue that Christ's death was only intended for (limited to) the elect, i.e. those who believe. Also called particular redemption, this view underscores God's sovereignty in salvation and points to the following texts, among others: "the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (John 10:11); Christ's high priestly prayer, where He prays, "I ask on [the disciples] behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world" (17:9); "Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Eph 5:25); and Paul's claim to believers, "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

On the other hand, adherents of an unlimited atonement claim that Christ's death was for everyone's sins. Non-Reformers highlight man's responsibility to God in light of Christ's death. This side considers texts that affirm a universal/general scope to the atonement, such as the following: "Jesus Christ. . . is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for *those of the whole world*" (1 John 2:2); "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29); "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor 5:19); "Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tim 2:6); "by the grace of God [Christ] might taste death for everyone" (Heb 2:9); and false

prophets and false teachers are “among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them” (2 Pet 2:1).

Application. Since both sides of this debate claim biblical support, it is important to consider the application of the atonement. Everyone agrees that every single individual will not be saved but that a gospel call to repentance must go out anyway (cf. Acts 17:30). Moreover, John 3:16 is proof that God has a general love for all the world proven through Christ’s death, but such a death is effectively applied only upon believing in Christ. Likewise, God “is the Savior of all men, especially of believers” (1 Tim 4:10). Thus, both divine sovereignty in initiating salvation and human responsibility in receiving Christ by faith are key components in the atonement’s scope and application (see GRACE, LOVE).

In the end, the most biblical approach to the extent of the atonement may be to say that Christ’s death is sufficient for all (unlimited in scope), but it is efficient only for the believers (limited in application). Thus, much like many of the complementary theories of the atonement, both the general and the limited views of the atonement bring some truth to the table.

Bibliography

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1938.

Bromiley, G. W., “Atone,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979.

Erickson, Millard F. *Christian Theology*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998.

Morris, Leon. *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965.

_____. *The Cross in the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965.

Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. *Irenaeus in The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 1. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994.

Joel R. Breidenbaugh