

Theology 101 — Atonement
March 13, 2022
St. Mark's Episcopal Church
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From the Catechism in the BCP

Q	What is the great importance of Jesus' suffering and death?
A	By his obedience, even to suffering and death, Jesus made the offering which we could not make; in him we are freed from the power of sin and reconciled to God.

Atonement in Christian theology means the reconciliation of humanity with God through the sacrificial act of Jesus including his death, but not necessarily only his death.

The need for this is implicit in the Hebrew Scriptures when God is shown as absolutely righteous to which nothing sinful or impose can approach. Even John the Baptist's call to repentance implies a state of separation of humanity from the divine.

John's gospel uses the image of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away sins.

From early days the paschal mystery was an equating of Jesus' sacrifice with that of the Passover.

Atonement in the New Testament (Anchor Bible Dictionary)

- Variety of images
- Not just in different parts of scripture, but by the same author
- Seeks to answer the question of how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus have changed the human condition
- Overall more concerned with the nature of salvation than the precise way it has been achieved
- Based in experience
 - Forgiveness
 - New life
 - The belief that this was God's work done in love
- Variety of descriptions is due in part to eh different ways the human situation is described.
- Different ideas of sin and separation required different images for what changes that
 - If its individual sins that are considered central, the atonement is often described as a payment/sacrifice for sin
 - If the human situation is being under hostile powers, then the atonement may be described as rescue or victory
 - If the human situation is considered ignorance, then atonement is enlightenment
 - Some theologians limit the definition to one of these, but it is a more robust understanding to look at it from different vantage points

- What problem are you trying to solve?

Sacrifice

- Claim that Jesus' death on the cross should be seen as a sacrifice is probably the most well know view of the atonement
- Rooted in the NT, and references to blood
- Death for our sins, for many
- Mark 14:24 Jesus said to them "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many
- Widespread use of sacrifice in the ancient world
- Use of sacrificial language to related to the death of a person is harder to find parallel in pre-Christian Jewish tradition
- Substitutionary language is often attributed to Paul, but representative is probably closer
- Jesus' death is the point at which Jesus joins humanity at its point of final annihilation and lostness; through the resurrection Jesus overcomes death and becomes the source of new life for all
- Irenaeus "he became what we are so that we might become what he is"
- Humans are being summoned to join Jesus

Redemption

- This language would have been culturally normative
- Slaves could be redeemed by paying a ransom price
- Liberation from slavery in Egypt through the exodus
- Whether NT authors ever thought of Jesus death as a "ransom price" is less clear
- When Paul uses language "you have been bought with a price" 1 Cor 6:20 is stressing the fact that Christians have now changed their allegiance and have a new master in God.

Victory Over Evil Powers

- Picks up specifically on themes from Exodus
- Freedom is experienced and delivered
- Col 2:13-15 when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God[e] made you[f] alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed[g] the rulers Early Christian writers developed the idea of sacrifice and elaborated it into a doctrinal understanding.

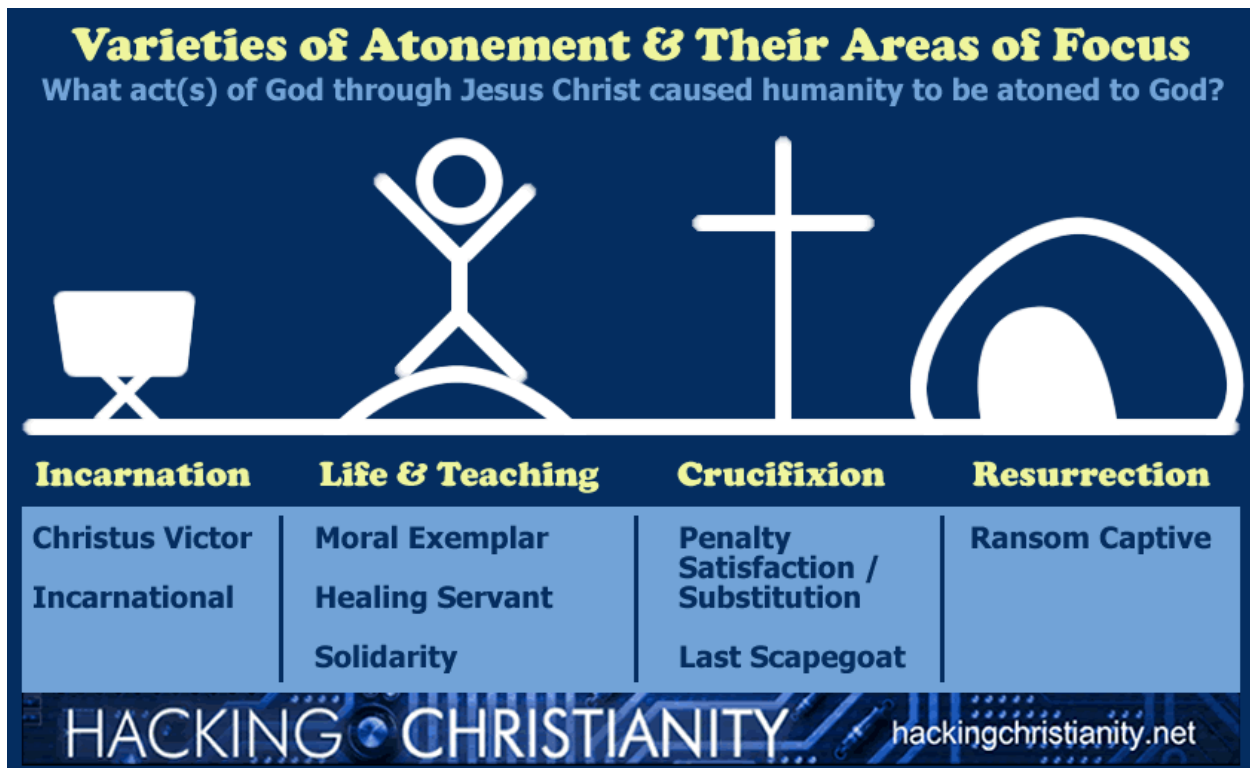
Reconciliation

- Previous categories are less individual and more abstract
- This is more about our individual experience
- Primarily in Pauline texts

Revelation

- Christ's work is to reveal both the nature of God and humanity
- Primary focus of John's gospel
- Less focused on human need in terms of sin, guilt, slavery or enmity, but our separation that is born out of ignorance
- Coming of Jesus reveals in a new way to us, the glory of God
- Focus on knowledge
- Crucifixion is the great hour

Summary of Major Doctrines of Atonement (source: hackingchristianity.net)



- **Christus Victor.** Popularized by Irenaeus, Jesus' life is a victorious struggle against evil. While many would place this at the Resurrection, Irenaeus would place the locus at the Incarnation and God existing before time as part of the Trinity.
- **Incarnational Atonement.** Popularized by Fredrick Schleiermacher, something about the way Jesus *is* invites us into ideal humanity, made possible simply because of the Incarnation. God becoming flesh atones humanity in that instant, and all that matters is that God became human.
- **Moral Exemplar.** Popularized by Abelard, Jesus' life and death is a powerful enough example of love and obedience to influence sinners to repent of their sins and improve their lives.
- **Solidarity.** Popularized by Tony Jones and Jurgen Moltmann, Jesus' life stands as testimony that he always stood with the marginalized, the poor, the prostitutes and the tax

collectors. His death was the result of his life. We are called to identify with Christ's suffering and to stand with those whose experience of being forsaken parallels Christ on the cross.

- **Healing Servant.** Popularized by some interpretations of John Wesley his perspective sees sin as disease and grace as healing, referencing Christ as the Great Physician.
- **Penalty Satisfaction/Substitution.** Popularized by Augustine/Anselm, the death of Jesus on the cross is the paying of a debt (or satisfying a debt) caused by humanity's sinful nature offending God's honor. Also framed as Jesus taking the place (substituting) for humanity on the Cross.
- **Last Scapegoat.** Popularized by Rene Girard, tribal human societies needed a release valve to let off the pressure of increasing rivalry and violence, so a scapegoat victim is sacrificed, thus relieving the pressure of violence. Jesus' death as a "visible victim/scapegoat" shows the injustice and inherent immorality of the scapegoating system on display
- **Ransom Captive.** Popularized by Origen, Jesus' death is the ransom paid to the devil (or evil powers) to free humans from the bondage of sin. Its locus is the Resurrection as that's when the Devil was tricked and he didn't have any control over Christ at all.