

Atonement Theories and the Action in the Transaction

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MB 620 - Christology

June 2008

Introduction

Immediately after his baptism, the character 'Delmar' (played by Tim Blake Nelson) in '*Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?*¹', excitedly announces to his friends, 'Well that's it, boys! I've been redeemed! The **preacher's** done warshed away all my sins and transgressions!' (Emphasis mine)² Indeed, a delightfully humorous, misunderstanding of the Atonement.

Few other aspects of Christian Theology have such a direct and wide impact on church life than that of the work of Christ on the cross. Various ways of describing the Atonement have emerged from Christian theological minds from various cultures over the centuries. Their descriptions remain with us, seen in much of the Church's singing, preaching and teaching, but are these treasured images truly reflective of the message of Scripture?

This essay will ask just that question by way of analysis of three main transactional theories; *ransom*, *satisfaction* and *penal substitution*. It will be shown, while none is without apparent biblical support, each is insufficient on their own for fully understanding the Atonement. A more *integrated* and *wider* understanding will be presented, re-asserting the Atonement as an effectual *action*, rather than a mechanistic transaction.

Ransom Theory: Giving the Devil More Than His Due?

The Ransom theory of the Atonement proposes the sacrificial death of Christ as the 'ransom payment', which was necessary to 'purchase' sinners. We owe a debt we cannot pay, which is 'paid-in-full'³ in the form of Christ. The impact of this theory is manifested in countless songs and sermons which (often without context or clarification) which use the payment/debt language. And of course, many biblical 'proof verses' exist for this imagery.⁴

The question of who actually *receives* the ransom, has (though without

¹ *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* 2000, Touchstone Pictures.

² 'Delmar (Character) Quotes,' Internet Movie Database.
<http://www.imdb.com/character/ch0004827/quotes>.

³ Jesus' words 'It is finished.' (John 19:30) on the cross are taken to signal the moment at which the ransom was paid.

⁴ E.g. - Mark 10:45 (Matt. 20:28); 1 Timothy 2:6; 1 Cor. 6:20, 7:23; 2 Peter 2:1.

NT support)⁵ found 'Satan' as the common answer beginning with Origen.⁶ An even more disturbing development (this time from Gregory of Nyssa) was that of the 'mouse-trap' scenario in which Christ was 'bait' which Satan swallowed! This is rightly called 'crude and bizarre imagery' by Letham.⁷ Of great concern to both ancient and modern theologians is the implicit suggestion that God would (or even *could*) find Himself in need of having to 'deal' with Satan in this way. Is the Ransom theory guilty of 'giving the devil more than his due' in the event of redemption?

The language of purchase is certainly present in a few texts, which provides reason enough for many to construct elaborate and detailed explanations of just what kind of 'deal' was struck. In contrast, Green helpfully illustrates how the metaphor works in the OT, drawing attention to the link between 'ransom' and 'atonement', which takes place, not by an actual 'payment', but rather by *liberation* (i.e. freeing his people from captivity in Egypt or Babylon).⁸ At any rate, 'ransom' is one of many other ways in which the work of Christ is pictured, and like the others, we would do well not to develop this metaphor further than the biblical writers themselves do.⁹

Satisfaction Theory: An Unsatisfactory Picture?

Anselm of Canterbury is often said to have been the first to talk of Atonement in terms of 'satisfaction' offered to God. Letham, however, points back all the way to Tertullian and Cyprian (even Hilary of Poitiers?) for a much earlier use of the term (though arguably not the same concept).¹⁰ Nonetheless,

⁵ Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey and Andrew Sach, *Pierced For Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (England: Inver-Varsity Press, 2007), 143-144. The authors note (surprisingly!) that even C.S. Lewis seems to follow this 'pay-off' scheme in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* (e.g. Edmund indebted to the Witch).

⁶ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ; Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 161.

⁷ *ibid.*, 162.

⁸ Joel B. Green, 'Atonement' *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, A-C Volume 1*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 346.

⁹ On Atonement metaphor, see (helpfully) Henri Blocher. 'Biblical Metaphors and the Doctrine of the Atonement' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47(4): (2004), 629-645.

¹⁰ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ; Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 163.

it is Anselm whose writings had such a formative effect on later Atonement thought. His *Cur Deus Homo?* is a discussion (with his disciple 'Boso') of his understanding of all things relating to human sin, the offense to God and the need for 'satisfaction'.

He who does not render this honor which is due to God, robs God of his own and dishonors him...¹¹

... either man renders due submission to God of his own will ... or else God subjects him to himself by torments ...¹²

... satisfaction or punishment must needs follow every sin.¹³

The outworking is that human sinners find themselves fully and irreversibly unable themselves to offer the necessary satisfaction to God. Furthermore, God being unable to offer to Himself the satisfaction He so desires, means that only One who is both God and Man can offer it. Once again, this theory can be buttressed by various proof-texts¹⁴, likely drawing parallels from OT texts about the 'pleasing' nature of sacrifice, inferring that Christ's sacrifice on the cross was the most pleasing of all sacrifices.

However, many commentators have attributed the flavor of Anselm's understanding to the influence of feudal culture (e.g. – unfaithful vassals dishonoring their land-lords) in which he lived and breathed.^{15 16} Ever since Peter Abelard (a contemporary of Anselm), many later theologians took issue with Anselm's specific premise that equal satisfaction for sin was absolutely necessary.¹⁷ Later commentators accuse Anselm of having a 'crude' understanding of justice. Just how, for example, is God's honor restored by way

¹¹ Anselm, 'Cur Deus Homo?' Eternal Word Television Network.
<http://www.ewtn.com/library/CHRIST/CURDEUS.HTM>, (accessed 19.6.08).

¹² *ibid.*,

¹³ *ibid.*,

¹⁴ E.g. – 1 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 5:2; Heb. 9:26, 10:12.

¹⁵ David M Gustafson, 'J. G. Princll and the Waldenstromian view of the atonement', *Trinity Journal* 20(2): (1999), 206.

¹⁶ Stephen Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2007), 56-57.

¹⁷ Kent William, 'Doctrine of the Atonement,' The Catholic Encyclopedia.
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02055a.htm>, (accessed 19.6.08).

of human 'torments'? Surely God's honor is protected by the truth of his honorable-ness? Surely God is able to freely pardon and forgive the offense of human sinfulness with or without 'satisfaction' being offered?¹⁸

Penal Substitution Theory: No Theory Will Substitute?

Penal Substitution theory describes the Atonement in terms of Christ being the substitute who 'takes the punishment' (the *penalty*) that was due to sinful humans. When one looks to the Scriptures in search of support for Penal Substitution (not to mention most any doctrine), they are faced with the difficulty of discerning between wording (language) and doctrine (formulation of ideas). It is far more difficult to trace the specific doctrine than the more general language of sacrificial death. Daly rightly observes that biblical language of sacrifice and atonement are so related that misunderstanding one often means misunderstanding the other.¹⁹

A full survey (not to mention analysis) of the numerous texts cannot be done here, so instead we will outline how the doctrine is supported and which aspects of it have been criticized. The issues involved are both wide (ranging all over Scripture), and deep (delving into great exegetical detail), so the analysis here (or anywhere for that matter) must struggle to keep both forest and trees in view. To make things even more difficult, for many (especially, of course, the scholars in defense of the doctrine), Penal Substitution is at the very heart of 'the Gospel'; making any questioning or challenging of the doctrine also a questioning or challenging of 'the Gospel' itself.

In one of the latest and most comprehensive defenses of the doctrine of Penal Substitution, Jeffery, Ovey and Sach²⁰ begin their defense by claiming a far-reaching historical heritage for the doctrine, including such names as Justin Martyr, Eusebius, Athanasius, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin and others; which

¹⁸ For an interesting view that satisfaction is *not enough* for forgiveness, see Richard Cross, 'Atonement Without Satisfaction' *Religious Studies* 37: (2001), 397–416.

¹⁹ Robert J Daly, 'Images of God and the Imitation of God: Problems with Atonement' *Theological Studies* 68(1): (2007), 38.

²⁰ Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey and Andrew Sach, *Pierced For Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (England: Inver-Varsity Press, 2007), 8-9.

raises the initial question of how likely (or unlikely) it is that each and every one had the same understanding of the doctrine? Following the historical question is the biblical question of how well the doctrine reflects Scripture itself. The most substantial criticisms of the doctrine have been along these two lines.

A popular criticism is expressed by the phrase 'divine Child-abuse'; which is objecting to the idea that God's only way of working forgiveness was by causing the violent death of His Son. In this sense, Penal Substitution receives the same kind of criticism as the Ransom and Satisfaction theories, in that they are all thought to limit God's ability to freely (and based on His nature and character) forgive and restore relationship to sinful humanity without needing to 'pay off Satan' (ransom), 'receive satisfaction' (satisfaction) or brutally 'punish' His Son (penal substitution).

In one of the most significant works critiquing Penal Substitution, Brad Jersak outlines reasons why God is commonly thought of (wrongly in his view) as 'punishing' Jesus on the cross: 1) God cannot look on sin, 2) God laid our sin(s) on Jesus and 3) God forsook Jesus, turning his face from him, which means that (summing them all up) 4) God sacrificed Jesus for our sins and in our place (as substitutionary ram, lamb and/or scapegoat).²¹ Daly adds that it is love which saves, not suffering; referring to the words of Cynthia Crysdale; '...suffering and the violence that causes it is a *consequence* of union with God, not the *means* to it.'(Emphasis mine)²² Other scholars either shift the focus of Atonement off of the cross, or attempt to widen the emphasis to include other key events. For example, McCormack²³ emphasizes the Incarnation as the key event in redemption, while Danaher²⁴ sees the Resurrection as the starting point.

These and other critical, dissenting voices more than effectively raise the

²¹ Brad Jersak, 'Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ' *Stricken By God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, Ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, (Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 35.

²² Robert J Daly, 'Images of God and the Imitation of God: Problems with Atonement' *Theological Studies* 68(1): (2007), 47.

²³ Bruce L McCormack, 'For us and our salvation: Incarnation and atonement in the reformed tradition' *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 43(1-4): (1998), 281-316.

²⁴ William Danaher, 'Towards a Paschal Theology of Restorative Justice' *Anglican Theological Review* 89(3): (2007), 359-373.

question of whether or not Penal Substitution is absolutely *central* to a right understanding of the Atonement. Jeffery, Ovey and Sach are ‘absolutely’ convinced it is.²⁵ This question will now be considered alongside the wider question of the appropriateness of transactional theories in general.

Atonement Theories and the Action in the Transaction

In a similar fashion as the doctrine of the Trinity gains its support from many different verses, contexts and themes in Scripture, so it is with our understanding of how the Atonement ‘works’. Neither the inter-personal framework of the Trinity nor a transactional outline of the Atonement is spelled out for us in Scripture; rather, they must be apprehended from its themes, symbols and pictures. This writer is convinced that the Atonement (at-one-ment – making us ‘at-one’ with God) is far too majestic a reality to be fully summed up by any one theory alone. Green posits that Jesus’ death ‘could not be represented without remainder by any one concept or theory or metaphor.’²⁶

Some may protest that this makes the mistake of throwing out the baby of theological precision with the bathwater of over-precise formulation. It needs to be emphasized as clearly as possible, that while robust biblical and theological precision is always important, when it comes to Atonement, the ‘baby’ to never be thrown out is not our understanding of the Work of Christ, but the Work of Christ itself. Countryman wisely summarizes:

Christian theology... has become far more precise and definite on this point than that of the biblical writers. One will understand the scriptural use of this language of atonement best by allowing the texts to remain somewhat ambiguous rather than forcing them into complete systematic consistency. The fundamental thing in sacrificial atonement is *the rite itself*, not the explanations of it.(Emphasis mine)²⁷

²⁵ Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey and Andrew Sach, *Pierced For Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (England: Inver-Varsity Press, 2007), 211.

²⁶ Green, Joel B, 'Atonement' *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, A-C Volume 1*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 347.

²⁷ Countryman, L. William, 'Atone' *The Westminster Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, Ed. Donald E.

The metaphor chosen is not of utmost concern. The importance of the cross itself as the saving rite is what matters most. Whether it is described by way of military (victory), communal (representation), relational (forgiveness), market-place (purchase), cultic (sacrifice or high priest) or other metaphor,²⁸ the action of God Himself winning (competition metaphor?) the Atonement with humanity is the reality to which the transactional theories are only pictures. The Atonement is the Action to which the transaction theories point to.

Wright beautifully summarizes:

...when Jesus was going to his own death, he indicated pretty clearly that he saw all the lines of scriptural narrative converging at this point; and, to help his disciples get the full meaning and benefit of what was about to happen, he didn't give them a theory, he gave them a *meal*. That meal - which was much more than a Passover meal, but not less - contains in itself not only all the various meanings of 'atonement' that are worth considering, but also the means by which theories can be turned into real life. Personal, practical, political life. Kingdom-of-God-on-earth-as-in-heaven life. And that, after all, is what 'atonement' ought to be about.(emphasis original)²⁹

The Atonement is just that important and just that large of a thing. Much more than a last-minute 'pay-off' to Satan is *given* here. Much more than 'satisfaction' is *offered* here. Much more than 'punishing' of Jesus is being *enacted* here. In Christ, the Atonement is God's action of giving, offering and enacting His own *life*. Indeed, this is about the at-one-ment of much more than individual sinners and God, but the at-one-ment of heaven and earth.

Gowan, (Louisville – London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 25.

²⁸ Green, Joel B, 'Atonement' *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, A-C Volume 1*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 346.

²⁹ N.T. Wright, 'The Cross and The Caricatures: a response to Robert Jenson, Jeffrey John, and a new volume entitled Pierced for Our Transgressions,' Fulcrum Online. <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2007/20070423wright.cfm?doc=205>, (accessed 20.6.2008).

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