

Atonement Theories unpacked:

Although “Christ crucified” was the main event for Paul, it is clear from his multiple attempts to explain it that even he wasn’t exactly sure how it all “worked.” Whether describing it as “expiation,” ransom, or redemption, Paul’s efforts have left a lot of room for multiple theories to emerge.

Satisfaction Theory: Derived from ancient Jewish ritual practices (including the Day of Atonement) where animals were sacrificed to satisfy God’s need for blood. Jesus becomes the ultimate sacrifice to appease this God who is so offended by human sin, that only the spilling of his own son’s blood will bring satisfaction. Incidentally, Canaanite religions were not the only ones to sacrifice their children to appease Baal and other gods. There are a number of Biblical examples of Judean kings and leaders who also ritually sacrificed their children, much to Yahweh’s *displeasure*.

Substitution Theory: The death of Jesus is NOT a sacrifice, but a pay-off to God. Human beings are so sinful that each of us deserves a horrible lingering and bloody death sentence. However, Jesus loves us so much that he was willing to step in and be our substitute. God would just as soon kill us for our sins, but the slaughter of the innocent satiates the divine’s blood lust.

Ransom Theory: If through sin, humanity is now stuck in and operating on the Devil’s “turf,” God had to pay off Satan in order to win our freedom. How? By paying with Jesus’ death.

Victory Theory: NOT a payment to the devil (which is the equivalent of giving in to terrorists), but a defeat-in-principle of the power of evil. Through Jesus’ “obedience unto death,” he showed he could take anything that the devil could dish out.

Moral Theory: Embraces the idea that the real point of Jesus’ obedience and death was to provide an example for humanity to follow -- to stay faithful to one’s convictions even in the face of injustice, brutality, and ignorance.

These theories offer VASTLY different “cosmic” dynamics: The first two are directed toward God by appeasing or compensating God for humanity’s trespasses. The second two are aimed at Satan and mark the end of “demonic control” through two diametrically opposed methods -- did God “pay off” or “punch out” the Devil? The last “moral” theory suggests a change of disposition, not of God or Satan, but of humanity itself.

The satisfaction theory has tended to be the most popular. It is reflected in Campus Crusade's "Four Spiritual Laws," the Roman Catholic's sacrifice of the Lamb of God on the altar, and in the hymns of American Protestantism ("There is a fountain filled with blood," "Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?" and "What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.") The Moral theory has been the least popular among orthodox theologians because it suggests that if humanity needed only an example to follow, it must not have been so sinful after all.

The existence of all these theories of atonement and their lack of any uniform understanding of what happened on the cross is due to the Biblical witness being unclear. Paul vs. the Gospels vs. Hebrews suggest different ways of grappling with a mystery. Since the theories of atonement are so confusing, have never been made uniform in scripture (let alone Christian theology), and lurk in a mishmash of imagery in each of our own religious upbringings, it's no wonder that we have ideological pandemonium in the streets.

For 21st century Christians, God's "saving work" in Jesus makes more sense being about integrity rather than suffering. To say "Jesus died for our sins" is not substitutionary or ransom-based, but Biblical shorthand for Jesus having died as a result of our collective sin, that is, from the normal operating procedure of unjust, oppressive, and insecure human beings. Yet despite who and what we are, the grace of God is modeled in Jesus' "obedience to death," obedience to remain forgiving and gracious even in the face of misrepresentation and humiliation. Being faithful to convictions like justice, non-violence, and the needs of the poor and the downtrodden are ways to take atonement out of the musty halls of speculative theology and make it real in the world.

— Rev. David M. Felten
From *Living the Questions: the Wisdom of Progressive Christianity*
www.livingthequestions.com
www.davidfelten.com