

Fall to Salvation: Where Does Atonement Fit In?

By Anand Peter

The doctrine of the Atonement, though central to the Christian faith, is a complex one, embracing a whole spectrum of Christian theology. The term itself was much used throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; theologians now generally hold that "Atonement" alone is too narrow a word to describe the whole of God's work in the person, mission, and work of Jesus Christ, and it has been progressively replaced by the broader term "Salvation," used to refer to the "theories of the Atonement," or, more properly, to "the work of Christ." This broader approach seeks to answer how Salvation is possible, in terms of the work of Jesus Christ, and how Salvation itself is to be understood.

Christianity holds that the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ have changed the world. The created order — humanity above all — had fallen into disarray, and this needed to be set right. According to the Christian faith, Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation not only of the nature of God the Creator, but also of how God the Creator relates to the created order; the New Testament explicitly relates the act of Creation to the person of Jesus Christ, who is Himself a participant in that Creation. Jesus Christ, therefore, through His acts of participation — His birth, life, death, and Resurrection — has secured Creation's ultimate redemption from the trouble it is in. The doctrine of Salvation deals with the restoration of the created order, and with bringing humanity into a right relationship with God; it follows, then, that His death on the Cross alone is not the whole of Christ's redemptive work, important though it is, alongside His other works.

It is worth considering the various theories that seek to explain the cause and effect of the work of Jesus Christ upon the Cross. Many renowned theologians have advanced their own theories, attempting to account for Christ's death there — among them the theories of Satisfaction, Ransom, Penal Substitution, Sacrifice, and Moral Influence. It falls outside the scope of a short piece such as this to discuss these theories in detail; readers may already have some acquaintance with what each proposes. What follows is a summary of them, together with the argument that no single theory, on its own, fully accounts for the work of God the Son, Jesus Christ.

I would argue that theologians' quest to understand God must remain within the framework of Scriptural knowledge — as must the enquiry of every student of Christianity. The Bible provides a definitive and profound account of God, His nature, and His work among His people. While it must be granted that not everything about God has yet been revealed to mankind, God has chosen to reveal of Himself, and of His plans for Salvation, as much as He has judged sufficient and safe for His people to know. This assumption gains credence once we accept that sin runs through the whole of humanity, and has corrupted God's created order along with it. To put it in a metaphor: cancer in the body must be removed before one attempts to infuse it with nutrients for building it up again. Seen from this perspective, the life, mission, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ should be understood as God's incarnation, in the person of Jesus Christ, to remove the cancer that plagues humanity, and to sustain it, thereafter, through His teaching. Any attempt to seek the truth outside the framework of the Bible can, at best, be regarded as belonging to the realm of an individual's own philosophical fancy.

It is hard to accept Anselm's assertion that human sin cheated God of the honour due to Him, and that Christ's death — the ultimate act of obedience — brings God great honour, or restores His honour, weakened as it were by sin. God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent; no one can begin to grasp the infinite scale of His honour, and how, then, could mere mortals inflict damage upon it? Man's disobedience may well have grieved God, but it could not have dented His honour. Both the Old and the New Testaments make plain how God grieved over His people, and how He worked, through chosen people, to bring about a change in their situation. It was Christ's own passion for His people — making no distinction here between God the Father and God the Son — which, having begun as grief caused by man's sin, led Him to become incarnate as a person. The remedy Christ undertook consisted of His teaching, His healing, His death on the Cross, and His Resurrection.

The Ransom Theory of Salvation holds that we were once the servants and slaves of evil, of Satan, but that Christ, through His suffering and death, has paid the price to set us free; from that time on, we are His subjects, and Satan no longer has dominion over us. That ransom price was not silver or gold, but, as Scripture puts it, "the precious blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:18-19). Sadly, Satan's onslaught upon believers has not yet ceased. The lesson to draw from this line of thought is the divine blood shed by Jesus on our behalf. Water has always been the ordinary agent of cleansing, but water is wholly inadequate to cleanse the soul; Christ's precious, divine blood alone has the power to do so. The institution of the Eucharist by Christ at the Last Supper, mere hours before His divine blood was shed, shows that Christ foresaw the plight of humanity, even after coming to faith, in needing a means of cleansing the soul "as often as" is necessary. Hence, the Eucharist.

The Penal Substitution Theory, standing alone, is deficient. The assumption that Jesus paid the price for our original sin leaves humanity still burdened with its ongoing sin. Sacrifice, in Old Testament times, was superficial in nature; seen in that light, one may accept that Christ offered Himself as the true sacrifice on the Cross, a sacrifice that had to be trustworthy, holy, and sincere, meant to bring the old form of sacrifice to an end. The question that remains is this: Christ chose to offer Himself as a sacrifice, but did that event bring about regret in the hearts of humanity? The Moral Influence Theory has real merit, but it, too, can hardly stand as the sole explanation of the Atonement.

None of these theories, taken alone, speaks of Christ offering Salvation from the Cross; the event of the Crucifixion, therefore, cannot in itself be regarded as an "end in itself" act by Christ. Were we to treat it so, we should struggle to make sense of His Resurrection, of the promise He made, and promptly kept, of help for humanity through His indwelling Spirit, God the Holy Spirit. Christ's death upon the Cross must be seen as carrying an implication far greater than anything we might reduce to Atonement, sacrifice, substitution, or moral influence alone. He had to shed His holy, pure, and divine blood, offering the cleansing of the believer's soul; the Lord's Supper, which He instituted, offers us the physical manifestation of that blood. The Crucifixion, as a result, set at nought eternal death, and sent out the promise that sin in the believer might yet be done away with. By the same token, His Resurrection demonstrated the possibility of an eternal, glorified life. Since the cleansing of the soul lies beyond the believer's own power, God the Holy Spirit is given to help in that task. Rather than treating the Crucifixion as an isolated event, then, we ought to see in it Christ's whole, intense passion for His people, reaching back to the Fall of man, continuing through His incarnate birth, His profound teaching

and the values He set before us to prepare His people, His death upon the Cross — deleting not sin, but eternal death — the glimpse of eternal glory shown in His Resurrection, His continued presence as God the Holy Spirit, and His everlasting passion for humanity. It is God's holistic plan of Salvation, not only for His people, but for the whole of His created order.

Amen.