

# Atonement Theology Seminar

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## Four Views of Christ's Atoning Work:

- I. Christ the Victor Theory
- II. Ransom Theory
- III. Substitution Theory
- IV. Moral Influence Theory

## I. CHRIST THE VICTOR (Christus Victor)

**1. Warfare Motif:** The biblical story can be understood from a perspective of God's ongoing cosmic battle against evil, both in the world and beyond.

**Psalm 74:10-14 & 104:1-9:** In the Old Testament, God is often depicted as battling natural elements of hostile waters and earthen creatures. These elements threaten God's good creation.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 5:22-25:** Earthly human battles and God's battle to overcome rival god's were viewed as one-and-the-same by ancient Israelites. Israelite enemies are God's enemies and vice-versa. "*The earth and its inhabitants exist in a cosmic war zone.*" (Boyd)

**2. Satan Motif:** The New Testament is replete with references to Satan oppressively ruling the earth and its inhabitants.

**John 12:31:** Jesus explicitly calls Satan (the enemy) the ruler of this world.

**Luke 4:5-6:** Satan tests the human Jesus with his power, trying to "break" and rule him.

**1<sup>st</sup> John 5:19:** The whole world is subjected to the power of evil.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 4:4:** Satan is the god of this world who blinds us to God.

**Ephesians 2:1-2:** Satan is ruler of the air that surrounds us (“the devil made me do it!”).

**Acts 10:38:** *“Each one of Jesus’ many healings and deliverances diminished Satan’s hold on the world and liberated people.”* (Boyd)

**3. Cosmic Battle Motif:** Jesus personifies God’s battle against the forces of evil through his life, death and resurrection.

**Ephesians 6:12 & Colossians 2:8:** Humans are easily caught up in this cosmic battle between God and evil.

**Romans 6:6:** Sin is individual behavior influenced and dominated by the power of evil, a *“power that holds people groups as well as individuals in bondage.”* (Boyd)

The Apostle Paul believed that Jesus came to break the power of sin/evil over us, essentially conquering its oppressive “spell” and releasing us from bondage to Satan by displacing him as ruler of this world.

**4. Salvation as Deliverance:** Whereas the cross of Christ certainly “wins” us forgiveness of sins, the essence of the atoning work of Christ on the cross is that it frees us from Satan’s grip and thereby the power of sin. (2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 2:26)

*“All who trust in Christ are incorporated into him and therefore share in this cosmic victory. This is the essential meaning of ‘salvation’ in the New Testament.”* (Boyd)

**5. Cosmic Salvation:** Larger than our individual salvation is the salvation of the cosmos. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus restored the entire fallen creation to its proper order, and we are but a small part of that re-ordering, renewing and redeeming. (Colossians 1:15-20 & Romans 8:18-23)

*“Our personal and social victories participate in Christ’s cosmic victory.”* (Boyd)

### **Benefits of the Christus Victor View:**

1. It is a helpful corrective to our anthropocentrism, that is, our human-centered way of thinking.
2. It shows God's concern for all of creation, not just humanity.
3. It displays God's power to defeat the darkest evil.
4. It makes clear our powerlessness over sin and evil.
5. It depicts our total dependence on God's atoning power.

### **Drawbacks of the Christus Victor View:**

1. It explains sin as being outside of us more than inside of us.
2. It somewhat exempts individuals from responsibility for personal choices.
3. It suggests that we are merely a prize to be fought for.
4. It does not emphasize the change atonement brings to us.

## **II. RANSOM THEORY**

- 1. Financial Image:** Human beings have worth; we are a commodity to God. Therefore, there is a certain price to "purchase" us back from Satan's domain and from an eternal death/hell.

*"The scene is a slave market or a prison camp. There are men who have lost their freedom. They are being sold into slavery, or they sit as captives of the enemy. But a man steps up and pays the price or gives the ransom money to purchase their freedom or to redeem them. We are the slaves or prisoners. Jesus is our redeemer. The ransom price is high: his life for ours. But he pays it for our sake."* (Guthrie)

**Mark 10:45:** Jesus exchanged his life to redeem our life.

**1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6:20:** Paul uses the image of financial transaction to depict our redemption.

**1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:18-19:** Peter tells us that Christ's blood is the ransom price.

**Titus 2:14:** Jesus gave us nothing less than his whole self.

*“Loving us, God does not give us something, but himself; and giving us himself, giving us his only son, he gives us everything.” (Karl Barth)*

**Galatians 3:13:** The price Christ paid was to become our curse for us.

*“Christ hath purchased redemption.” (Westminster Confession of Faith 6.050)*

**Benefits of the Ransom View:**

1. It shows that sin has a high price.
2. It shows that redemption and grace are not free.
3. It shows the worth of humanity to God.

**Drawbacks of the Ransom View:**

1. That Jesus is the only acceptable payment to God is unsettling.
2. The idea that God has to be “bought off” is problematic.
3. The financial image can be seen as “cold” and detached.

### **III. SUBSTITUTION THEORY**

1. **A Legal Image:** The heart of substitutionary theories of atonement is found in the guilt associated with sin and the need for someone to pay the penalty incurred by the infraction of sin. The penalty that must be paid to appease a righteous God is nothing short of death.

**Romans 1:18:** *“God’s holy anger is directed against all those who have sinned.”*(Schreiner)

**Romans 6:23:** Sin, or rejection of God, deserves or “earns” death.

**Romans 3:23:** This is a universal human condition or “disease.”

**2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:21:** Jesus took the burden of our curse of sin on himself.

**Romans 5:9-10:** We are justified (or made right with God) by the sacrificial death of Christ.

**Romans 4:25:** The resurrection of Christ “completes” our forgiveness, or pardon from guilt.

*“The Father, because of his love for human beings, sent his Son (who offered himself willingly and gladly) to satisfy God’s justice, so that Christ took the place of sinners.” (Schreiner)*

In essence, human beings had to have a substitute who could, through his own righteousness, sacrifice himself so to make up for our unrighteousness. Jesus was the only candidate for this. You and I could not substitute for one another.

**2. Justice Satisfied:** The need for justice in the face of sin is grounded in God’s uncompromising holiness. God is loving and just, *not* just loving! The love of God cannot “swallow up” the justice of God.

**Romans 3:10-11:** *“Those who stand before God the judge have no word of defense.” (Schreiner)*

**2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 1:5:** God’s justice is, in some sense, retributive justice. That sin deserves punishment is an out-growth of God’s holy and just character.

*“While humanity must provide this satisfaction, only God can provide it.” (Migliore)*

**3. Sacrificial Backdrop:** For centuries the precedent had been set in the Jewish faith that something living must die to atone for the sins of people. Thus, the practice of altar sacrifice was central to Israel.

**Genesis 22:1-2:** The near-sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham pre-figures the sacrifice of the Son of God.

**Exodus 12:13:** The vengeance of God will pass over those who are “covered” by the blood of the sacrificial lamb.

**Hebrews 9:12:** Jesus became the once-for-all eternal sacrifice for our sins.

**Benefits of Substitutionary Theory:**

1. It depicts the desperate situation of human beings.
2. “*God’s holiness is vindicated in the cross.*” (Schreiner)
3. It teaches the costliness of redemption.
4. It illustrates the unreserved love of Jesus for us.
5. It is relational more than transactional in nature.

**Drawbacks of Substitutionary Theory:**

1. It brings the ideas of mercy and justice into collision.
2. Grace appears to be conditional.
3. It may imply that God, not humanity, needs reconciling.
4. “*A legalistic concern to satisfy God’s honor and justice so that we may escape punishment without inward change.*” (Guthrie)
5. It can appear to be mechanical rather than personal.

**IV. MORAL INFLUENCE VIEW**

**1. Holistic Atonement:** The moral influence theory suggests that it is Christ’s life of perfection - not just his death and resurrection - that “influences” our redemption. We look to the life of Christ to understand what it means to live be redeemed.

**Matthew 20:28:** This could suggest that it is the life of Christ that is given to us as an example, *not* as a sacrifice. “*The atoning efficacy of Christ’s work is not limited to his death.*” (Hastings Rashdall)

It is morally focused. The atoning life of Christ “*really does make men better, instead of supplying the ground why they should be considered good or be excused from the punishment of sin, without being really made any better than before.*” (Rashdall)

**2. Healing Atonement:** By living the perfect life on our behalf, Jesus initiated healing between God and humanity, restoring us back to right relationship.

**Luke 4:40:** The healings done by Jesus on earth “*presuppose the invasion of the kingdom of God into the realm of suffering caused by evil... the healing of diseases is only a part of a much larger picture, wherein sin itself, and not just its symptoms, is dealt a final blow.*” (Donald Hagner)

**Benefits of Moral Influence:**

1. It stresses the life and love of God.
2. It de-emphasizes vicarious suffering.
3. It points to the unconditionality of God's love.
4. It emphasizes the importance of human response.

**Drawbacks of Moral Influence:**

1. It tends toward a sentimentalization of God's love.
2. It neglects the need for justice associated with a holy God.
3. It ignores the power of evil and sin.
4. Jesus can easily be reduced to merely a good example to follow.

*“A God without wrath brought people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”*

-H. Richard Niebuhr

**Sources:**

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