

CHRISTOLOGY: ATONEMENT

WEEK 4

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OUTLINE

BIBLICAL WITNESS OF ATONEMENT

Old Testament

New Testament

THE DOCTRINE OF ATONEMENT

Introduction

Doctrinal Error

Penal Substitution

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SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM

There are early hints in the Pentateuch that sacrifice is very ancient:

- ▶ Gen 12:7-8—The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD.
- ▶ Gen 46:1—So Israel set out with all that he had, and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac.
- ▶ Exodus 3:18—They will pay heed to what you say; and you with the elders of Israel will come to the king of Egypt and you will say to him, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. So now, please, let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.’

Note: not all sacrifices involve atonement. At the very least we see an image of surrendering resources to God for relational purposes.

SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM

The concept atonement comes to the fore in Exodus and Leviticus with the introduction of the tabernacle and its associated cultus. Up to this point, there appears to be no more than loose rules governing sacrifice.

The word we translate as 'to atone' is *kaphar*, and has three primary uses:

1. to cover—In context, to cover over the sin
2. to ransom—Less figurative, to pay off a debt owed
3. to wipe—In context, to wipe clean from sin

No matter what the core meaning is, it's clear that we're dealing with either the removal sin or remitting of due punishment.

SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM

These are key features of the Levitical system instituted at Sinai:

1. Both *death* and *exclusion* due to sin are governing concepts:
 - ▶ Blood is a part of almost every atoning ritual (Heb 9:18, 22). Blood symbolically demonstrates that a life was surrendered; therefore, blood was excluded from all other aspects of life (Lev 17:11).
 - ▶ Sin creates a barrier between us and God: each layer of the tabernacle requires increased ritual/atonement. This reaches its ritual height in the scapegoat's total exclusion.
2. Holiness (Set apart, consecrated) is not identical to sin, though they are related.
 - ▶ Sin does amount to unholiness but not vice-versa: intercourse makes one unholy but is commanded by God! (Cf. Gen 1:28.)
 - ▶ Priestly families who are holy (set apart) must still atone for their sins.
 - ▶ Violating the holiness *laws* within the prescribed limits counts as sin.

PROPHETIC WITNESS

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is the most explicit as to atonement:

- ▶ 52:15a—Thus He will sprinkle many nations . . .
- ▶ 4a—Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried;
- ▶ 5—But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.
- ▶ 6b—But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him.
- ▶ 8b—who considered That He was cut off out of the land of the living For the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due?
- ▶ 10b—If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days,
- ▶ 11b—My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities.
- ▶ 12—Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors.

See also Psalm 49:7-15.

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NEW TESTAMENT

The number of passages on atonement and substitution is superabundant.
We will survey some here and cover more as we proceed:

1. Matt 26:28—for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. [What is Jesus indicating in this passage?]
2. Acts 2:38—Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”
3. I Cor 15:3—For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,
4. Gal 2:20b—I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.
5. Ephesians 1:7—In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace
6. Hebrews 10:12—but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God,
7. I John 4:10—In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

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THE EFFECT OF CHRIST'S DEATH

In what follows we will examine a number of theories of the atonement. Some of them treat Christ's death as essentially *subjective*: it *inspires* within us certain behavior but did not necessarily accomplish anything apart from our reaction to it. These include:

1. Socinian Theory
2. Moral-Influence Theory
3. Governmental Theory (Mixed)

Some of them treat Christ's death as essentially *objective*: Christ's death elicits a response from us *because* of its genuine effects. These include:

4. Ransom Theory
5. Penal Substitution Theory

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SOCINIAN THEORY (SUBJECTIVE)

Named after Socinus, here are a few features of this type of teaching:

1. Socinians are non-trinitarian: Jesus is simply one man among others who was particularly devout.
2. Placing exaggerated weight on I Peter 2:21, the value of Jesus' death is "in the beautiful and perfect example of the type of dedication we are to practice." (Erickson, 801-802)
3. They deny the concept of original sin.
4. They explicitly deny any notion of vicarious satisfaction.

This view is probably one of the least biblical, but does have a certain internal coherence.

MORAL-INFLUENCE THEORY (SUBJECTIVE)

According to Abelard's Moral-Influence Theory, atonement is a demonstration of God's love—it influences us to live moral lives. Some highlights:

- ▶ The previous view emphasizes the example of the love *for* God at the cross, whereas this view emphasizes the example of the love *from* God at the cross.
- ▶ Jesus' death was mainly to correct our fearful view of God, not to satisfy the wrath the God, indicating that our problem with God is not really a moral one, so much as one of ignorance.
- ▶ Jesus is, therefore, seen as more of a teacher than as a sacrifice or judge.

Although this view is as old as 12th Century, it is popular among modern liberal theologians and many mainline protestants.

What are some difficulties for this view?

MORAL-INFLUENCE THEORY (SUBJECTIVE)

What are some difficulties for this view?

1. If Jesus is simply showing his love for us by dying, he looks foolish at best; at worst, the lack of objective efficacy of his death undermines the claim that it demonstrates God's love.
2. It lowers the stakes concerning sin, justice and God's holiness.
3. Blatantly unbiblical given the voluminous literature in Hebrews about Jesus' sacrificial work. The following smaller snippets are also clear enough to repudiate this view:
 - ▶ II Cor 5:21—He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.
 - ▶ I Peter 3:18—For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit;
 - ▶ Mark 10:45—For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

GOVERNMENTAL THEORY (MIXED)

The Governmental Theory views the Atonement as a demonstration of God's divine justice.

- ▶ God's highest goal is to uphold a moral government, not necessarily to satisfy the demands of justice.
- ▶ This view emphasizes God's role as legislator and judge. He issues laws and has the right to punish violators. Nevertheless, God also reserves the right to overlook sin.
- ▶ Punishment on this view is not retributive but serves as a deterrent for future evil. Therefore, Jesus' death is *not* a vicarious substitution but is meant to demonstrate God's hatred of sin and to repel us from sin towards repentance.
- ▶ Christ's death does play some objective role insofar as it was sufficient to convince God that some dramatic display was rendered for sin which made it appropriate for God to forgive sin.

GOVERNMENTAL THEORY (MIXED)

Some Issues:

- ▶ Ironically, although this view is built around an elevated view of law and justice, sin never really receives its just punishment. Punishment is dispensed at will.
- ▶ As with other subjective theories, the subjective component is undermined by the lack of objective basis: the horror of cross is less gripping if Jesus does not actually take sin onto himself.
- ▶ Its progenitor, Grotius, was a lawyer and mainly extrapolated from his legal experience. “One thing that strikes us as we examine the governmental theory is its lack of explicit scriptural basis. We search in vain in Grotius’ work for specific biblical texts setting forth his major point.” (Erickson, 809)

RANSOM THEORY (OBJECTIVE)

This view was held by early church fathers like Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine. On this view, the atonement is God's victory over the forces of sin and evil. Here are some central concepts:

- ▶ Satan has claim over humanity and holds us in slavery.
- ▶ God surrendered Jesus to *Satan* as a ransom (Mark 10:45) for humanity. This was ultimately a ruse because Jesus cannot be held by death.
- ▶ This view is sometimes described as the *Christus Victor* view of atonement.

What strengths does the Ransom theory have over previous views?

RANSOM THEORY (OBJECTIVE)

What strengths does this theory have?

- ▶ Among these theories, it takes the substitutionary component most seriously: there is an *exchange* of Jesus for humanity.
- ▶ Satan is real and truly plays a central role in the fight for human souls (just not as described).

Ultimately, this theory must be rejected for a number of reasons:

- ▶ There is no biblical evidence that Satan owns us. The Bible indicates that we're slaves to *sin* not Satan. Satan *uses* sin to keep us from God but he is not Lord of sin. After all, he is also a sinner. (Ezekiel 28:16)
- ▶ It ignores the language of propitiation (satisfying God's wrath) which is abundant in NT and implicit in the Levitical system.
- ▶ The violation of God's law and his holy wrath play no role whatsoever.
- ▶ Although there are ways around it, this theory portrays God as deceiving Satan.

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THEOLOGICAL CONTROLS

Many of the above views were exposed as sub- or anti-biblical in their emphases. Here are theological boundary lines within which we expect a theory of atonement to stay:

1. The Nature of God—God is holy, just and loving. While hating sin, he made man in His image.
2. The Human Condition—Man is totally depraved (every aspect of human person is corrupted by sin) and will not seek God on his own.
3. The Status of Law—This is closely connected to (1.), but ultimately violations of God's law are offensive to God himself. Likewise, a legal system establishes a framework for administering justice.
4. Christ—Jesus is fully God and man. As a man, he can substitute for us, as God has sacrifice is sufficient to satisfy God's wrath.
5. The Old Testament Sacrificial System—Jesus' death is consistently compared in the NT to sacrificial activity described in OT.

CENTRAL FEATURES OF PENAL SUBSTITUTION

Here are some central features of the penal substitution theory of atonement:

1. Sacrifice—Jesus surrendered his life as an offering to God in line with the demands of the OT system. (Hebrews 9:28)
2. Propitiation—Jesus' work on the cross is to satisfy or appease God's wrath. (Romans 3:25)
3. Substitution—Jesus exchanged his life for ours so that our debt to God is paid in full. (1 Peter 2:24)
4. Reconciliation—The effect of all this a renewed relationship with God, the healing of an ancient breach between God and man to be enjoyed by those who take hold of it by faith. (Romans 5:10)

OBJECTIONS TO PENAL SUBSTITUTION

How would you reply to the following objections?

1. Why can't God simply just forgive sins?
2. Penal *substitution*, rather than upholding justice, actually abrogates it. Each person should serve his/her own sentence.
3. There is something suspicious about Jesus' death making a wrathful God propitious. "Penal substitution is divine child abuse."

OBJECTIONS TO PENAL SUBSTITUTION

1. Why can't God simply just forgive sins?
 - ▶ God is holy and cannot face sin (Psalm 5:4-5).
 - ▶ Even we cannot tolerate such moral anarchy: what of Hitler?
2. Penal *substitution*, rather than upholding justice, actually abrogates it. Each person should serve his/her own sentence.
 - ▶ When the legal response of a crime involves a fine, no court would object if a near relative or friend paid. Substitution is not entirely alien to justice.
 - ▶ The peculiarity of this comes from our modern legal sensibilities. The legal system established by God has substitution at its very core.
3. There is something suspicious about Jesus' death making a wrathful God propitious. "Penal substitution is divine child abuse."
 - ▶ Jesus voluntarily went to the cross: he was not coerced but *submitted* (willful) to the will of the Father. (Jn 10:17-18; Mt 26:53)
 - ▶ Wrath is the morally appropriate response to sin and is even exhibited in our own moral indignation.

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