

ATONEMENT
A RESEARCH PAPER

A Study
Presented to
Dr. Samuel Thorpe
Life & Teachings of Paul

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ATONEMENT

Today in the Church, and especially in Charismatic circles, there is a lack of teaching on systematic theology and defining of terms. Often when terms are mentioned, gray images pop into the heads of the listeners and they guess at what the meaning is. Even when some ministers have used the terms in a key portion of their messages, they did not give a clue to the meaning.

The question to be resolved in this paper is simply put. What is the theory of atonement that best matches the Bible?

Description of Issue

Definition of atonement

Atonement is basically the same as reconciliation but perhaps a bit more explicit. The basic definition of Atonement is pronounced in its name: "at-one-ment."¹ If Christ's work on the Cross made "atonement" for sins, this would mean that people can be "at-one-with-God!" There is a differentiation between this term and reconciliation only to the degree that atonement seems to be used only for a relationship with God. In other words a person can be reconciled to their brother or sister in the Lord but they cannot be atoned to them.

Important Terms

There are many terms that are often confused with atonement. To alleviate the mistakes often made in understanding,

this short glossary of terms is provided:

Adoption: The "transfer from a status of alienation and hostility to one of acceptance and favor."²

Atonement: carries the idea of receiving the benefits of the sacrifice of Jesus, the propitiation made, the substitution of Jesus, and reconciliation!

Atonement (Scribner-Bantam): "Christ's redemptive sacrifice."³

Conversion: "Refers to the sinners response to God's offer of salvation and approach to humankind."⁴

Justification: "God's action pronouncing sinners righteous in His sight; it is a forensic act imputing the righteousness of Christ to the believer."⁵

Original Sin: This is the sin caused by the fall of man in the Garden of Eden and is the reason for the estrangement between God and man and the need for atonement.

Propitiation: Jesus also made propitiation to God for mankind.⁶ He, through His sacrifice, satisfied the principles that had been violated.

Reconciliation: Reconciliation is the generic term for atonement. Reconciliation ends the "period of estrangement" between two people or between God and man.

Regeneration: "God's transformation of individual believers, His giving new spiritual vitality and direction to their lives when they accept Christ."⁷

Sacrifice: Jesus is likened to the high priests of the Old Testament who made sacrifices on the Day of Atonement.⁸ However, he was not just the High Priest; He was also the sacrifice. It was His blood that cleansed sins.

Sanctification: "The continuing work of God is the life of the believer, making him or her actually holy."⁹

Substitute: Jesus also died as the substitute for mankind. He died for the sins that mankind had committed. Instead of having to die and spend eternity separated from God, Jesus substituted himself and paid the price.

Philosophical Terms

There are many philosophical factors that contribute to the doctrine of atonement. One of the primary factors is the individual's belief in atonement methods or theories. How a person interprets the means of Christ's atoning work affects his belief of the benefits of atonement. Some of these ideas are covered later in the portion entitled "Opinions of Scholars." However, understanding which method is used to interpret Christ's atoning work will provide a foundational basis for the theology of life after salvation.

Historical Background

The idea of atonement can be traced from the fall of man in the garden of Eden. It was here that the first need for atonement was seen--man had become estranged to God and needed a right relationship with Him. In the Old Testament God provided a sacrificial system that covered the sins of everyday life for the Hebrews: both through daily offerings for known sins and yearly offerings by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement for "unatoned, uncleansed sins."¹⁰ This however did not cover the "original sin" that had caused the estrangement in the beginning. Later, Christ came to be the final sacrifice and to make atonement once and for all. Since that time no sacrifice has it been worthy nor has it been needed.

Thesis

Atonement is the work that Christ accomplished by specific means (Satisfaction) upon the Cross to allow peaceful relations between two parties: God and man.

Opinions of Scholars

Throughout the history of the Church there have been many theories of what Jesus' atonement for us actually did.

David Stanley

Some of the people found in this study did not give a theory so much as they gave an expression of what atonement was as compared to God's timing. David Stanley, in his doctoral dissertation to Pontifical Biblical Institute of Rome, defined the atonement in light of Romans 3:21-26 simply as "an epiphany of God's justice."¹¹ God wanted to show His people that He was giving them justice in a way that also granted them the mercy they needed to survive. Without God's mercy and justice, atonement would have been worthless. The justice covered the need to have the relationship fixed "legally." The mercy made mankind eligible to participate in atonement.

Socinian Theory

The Socinian Theory was developed by Faustus and Laelius Socinus. In it they basically holds that Jesus' death 1) gave us an example of total love for God that is needed for salvation, and 2) gives us inspiration. In this theory atonement is simply a "metaphorical concept."¹² However,

this theory elevates human works to a position that it can't hold. If following the example of Jesus is the means of salvation 1) then most of the Bible is just a story and should not be looked to as a source of wisdom, 2) then salvation is still very unattainable because Jesus' example of total love for God is just as unattainable as paying for sin.

Moral-Influence Theory

The second theory is the Moral-Influence Theory and was developed by Peter Abelard. In this model, the basic problem is that people's "own attitudes keep [them] apart from God" not the violation of God's laws. The death of Jesus "demonstrates the full extent of God's love for [people]." Horace Bushnell, the man who popularized this theory in the United States, said sin was "a type of sickness from which we must be healed."¹³ My primary contention with this theory is that it elevates the importance of man and that it sounds much like Christian Science in that thoughts must be corrected in order to be counted righteous.

Governmental Theory

Hugo Grotius was the major proponent for the next theory known as the Governmental Theory. Grotius believed that it was not mandatory for God to punish, although He had the right to do so. He believed that it was possible for God "to relax the law so that He need not exact a specific punishment or penalty for each violation."¹⁴ To Grotius, Christ's death

was a substitution for a penalty rather than a substitution for humanity and its sins.¹⁵ This idea however was supported by a scripture that really had nothing to do with atonement: Isaiah 42:21. Grotius was a lawyer and made inferences from this text to support his arguments.¹⁶

Ransom Theory

One of the best known theories of atonement is known as the Ransom Theory or the classic view. Some of the major proponents of this theory were Origen, Athanasius, Irenaeus, Martin Luther, and Karl Barth.¹⁷ In this theory, Jesus' death was paid as a ransom to the devil for the control of humankind. The primary scriptures used to support this theory are Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45 which speak of Jesus offering his life as a ransom for many. This is not really supported by scripture.¹⁸

Satisfaction/Penal-Substitution Theory

The final theory to be covered is known as the Satisfaction Theory or the Penal-Substitution Theory. Many in the Roman Catholic scholastic and Protestant orthodoxy follow this theory. Some of the historical figures associated with this theory are Cyprian, Gregory the Great, Ambrose, Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas.¹⁹ This seems to follow the character that God has shown forth in the Bible. The basic premise of this theory is that "Christ died to satisfy a principle in the very nature of God the Father."²⁰ When picking this statement apart it shows some

of the characteristics that God has in the Bible. God has a set of principles that guide Him. He does not compromise them--He is a God of integrity. God however is love and loves humanity so he sent Christ to die for us. The principle that Christ died to satisfy is that the "wages of sin is death." Christ died to satisfy that statement. His death made it possible for mankind not to die. He satisfied the principle by becoming mankind's substitute.

Biblical Literature

There are many examples of atonement found in the Bible. most of the examples are found in the Old Testament. They are primarily blood sacrifices made by the high priests of the Old Testament. These sacrifices were not made "to reform or deter the sinner," rather to "cover" the sin in a manner satisfactory to God.²¹ The New Testament model is Jesus Christ, who made atonement once and for all.

Old Testament

The primary ideas of atonement coming from the Old Testament speak of the Old Testament sacrificial system. In Leviticus 1:2-4, God has told Moses to give orders for the practice of seeking atonement with God. Through the blood offered and the transferring of sin to the animal, the everyday sins of the person were "covered-up" (Hebrew *kaphar*).²² Also vital to the OT system is the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)--it is still the most important day of the Jewish calendar. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest enters

the Holy of Holies dressed in simple white garments. He began his ritual by making atonement for himself and his house. Then he would offer a goat as a sin offering for the people. During both offerings the high priest would sprinkle the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant. The high priest was then to take a live goat, lay both hands on its head, confess over it for the sins of Israel, and set the goat free in the wilderness.

New Testament

The New Testament provides a new, better method of atonement: Jesus Christ. There are many similarities between the Old Testament customs and the New Testament sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus was the new High Priest. He was also the new Sacrifice. In John 1:29, Jesus is referred to as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"²³ Also II Corinthians 5:19 says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." Romans 5 gives a lengthy discussion of Christ's reconciliatory work as well. All of these scriptures show that Christ's work replaced the OT sacrificial system and finally did away with the power that had kept man from God throughout time.

Conclusion

Analysis of Issue

In analyzation of the total concept of atonement, the thesis seems to have been shown to be true. Although more study could be done as to the difference between atonement

and reconciliation, at this point the terms are fairly interchangeable. If the difference between the two lies as is shown in the glossary of terms (see above) it would be an interesting study to prove it. However, there being no true Hebrew or Greek exegetical study done in this work, this cannot be shown to be true. The strongest views seem to be in the final theory of atonement shown in the "opinion of scholars" section. For the reasons given above it seems to hold the strongest factors of support. The weakest theory was the Governmental Theory. This was not really founded on scripture. It pulled a scripture out of context to use as its foundational scripture.

Resolution

Atonement is being at-one-with-God. It is a state of being. The method/means for accomplishing this was satisfaction of the principles that God had set to be the guide of His character. When understanding atonement in this theological light it should show the studier how God operates both in this and other areas. It also should show him that just as God operates by principles, so should the studier. The problem of which atonement is most Biblical still remains for many in the world. The problem will not be resolved until the return of the Lord because mankind knows only in part the things of God.

ENDNOTES

¹Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Paul and His Theology: A Brief Sketch, 2nd revised ed, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p.63.

²Millard J. Erickson, Introducing Christian Doctrine, ed. L. Arnold Hustad (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), p. 310.

³Edwin B. Williams, The Scribner-Bantam English Dictionary, ed. Edwin B. Williams (New York: Bantam, 1979), p. 60.

⁴Erickson, p. 299.

⁵Erickson, p. 306.

⁶Erickson, pp. 251-52.

⁷Erickson, p. 299.

⁸Erickson, p. 251.

⁹Erickson, p. 313.

¹⁰Robert G. Gromacki, New Testament Survey, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), p. 34.

¹¹David Michael Stanley, Christ's Resurrection in Pauline Soteriology, (Rome, Italy: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1961), p. 166.

¹²Erickson, p. 242.

¹³Erickson, p. 242.

¹⁴Erickson, p. 243.

¹⁵Erickson, p. 243.

¹⁶Erickson, p. 243.

¹⁷Donald G. Bloesch, Essentials of Evangelical Theology, Vol 1, God, Authority, & Salvation, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978), p. 152.

¹⁸Erickson, pp. 243-44.

¹⁹Bloesch, p. 153.

²⁰Erickson, p. 244.

²¹Erickson, p. 248.

²²Erickson, p. 248.

²³Erickson, p. 249.

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