

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, images pop into your head and you guess at what they mean. Perhaps even the minister at your church used the term in a key portion of his message without giving a clue at the meaning. This term 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 our sins, then we have been made “at-one-with-God!” I would differentiate this term with reconciliation only to the degree that atonement seems to be used only for a relationship with God. In other words you can be reconciled to your brother or sister in the Lord but you can’t be atoned to them.

The Scribner-Bantam English dictionary refers to atonement as “Christ’s redemptive sacrifice.”² They do make mention of the word “atone” as a synonym of “reconcile,”³ However, the Bible never makes mention of atonement between friends only between God and man.

An example that describes atonement can be found in the field of sound engineering. When sounds are working in opposite sound waves, they cancel each other out and neither is heard very well. However, when they are working together, they become extremely strong and loud. When we are at one with God, we become extremely strong and powerful because we are working with Him (some of us even become loud--joke).

Let’s read the text for the sermon. The focal verse is fifteen of chapter five of II Corinthians. But let’s read verses eleven through twenty-one.

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.⁴ The New Testament model, of course, is Jesus Christ, who made atonement once and for all.

I always get a kick out of the song “Dawning of the Age of Aquarius.” The song talks about the planets being all in line and an age of peace coming to the universe. Everyone is at peace with each other and with themselves and with nature, etc. However, God is not in the picture in the song. The only way to be at total peace is to be at one with God. The atoning work of Jesus Christ makes it possible to be at peace with God.

Throughout the history of the Church there have been many theories of what Jesus’ atonement for us actually did. I’d like to cover five theories today and show which I believe to be the best 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.”⁵ However, this theory elevates human works to a position that it can’t hold. If following the example of Jesus is our means of salvation 1) then most of the Bible is just a story and shouldn’t 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.

The second theory is the Moral-Influence Theory and was developed by Peter Abelard. In this model, our basic problem is that “our own attitudes keep us apart from God” not the violation of God’s laws. The death of Jesus “demonstrates the full extent of God’s love for us.” 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.”⁶ 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.

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.”⁷ To Grotius, Christ’s death was a substitution for a penalty rather than a substitution for humanity and its sins.⁸ 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.⁹

One of the best known theories of atonement is known as the Ransom Theory or the classic view. One of the major proponents of this theory was Origen. 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.¹⁰

The final theory that I’m going to cover is known as the Satisfaction Theory or the Penal-Substitution Theory. I feel as if this is one of the best theories. 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.”¹¹ When picking this statement apart I find that it shows some of the characteristics that I see in God 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 us not to die. He satisfied the principle by becoming our substitute.

There are four primary elements of atonement: sacrifice, propitiation, substitution, and reconciliation. Each of these elements are found in the work that Jesus did on the cross. In the idea of sacrifice, Jesus is likened to the high priests of the Old Testament who made sacrifices on the Day of Atonement.¹² However, he was not just the High Priest; He was also the sacrifice. It was His blood that cleansed our sins. Jesus also made propitiation to God for us.¹³ He, through His sacrifice, satisfied the principles that had been violated. Jesus also died as our substitute. He died for the sins that we committed. Instead of having to die and spend eternity separated from God, Jesus substituted himself and paid the price. The final element of atonement is reconciliation. As I said before reconciliation is the generic term for atonement. Perhaps the difference is shown best in this list. Reconciliation ends the “period of estrangement” between two people or between God and man. However, atonement carries the idea of receiving the benefits of the sacrifice of Jesus, the propitiation made for us, the substitution of Jesus, *and* reconciliation!

Now that you know what atonement is, how should you respond to it? Let’s go back to our text to see. In verse fifteen, the verse begins with “And He died for all.” Jesus’ atoning death was made for everyone. In the next portion of the scripture, it says, “that those who live should no longer live

for themselves but for Him who died for them and raised them again.” This verse says we should live for Jesus because He died for us that we could live! Living for ourselves is the same as ignoring Jesus’ death. Our response is to daily put Him first in our lives. We should attempt in every way to follow what He is saying in the Bible and doing as the Holy Spirit leads.

Some of you may recall the story taken from the book *Miracle on the River Kwai* by McDonald. The story is set in a World War II prison camp. After a hard day of work, the prisoners returned to camp. The Japanese guards counted the shovels that had been used and found that one shovel was missing. The prisoners were all lined up and put before a firing squad. The Japanese commander told the man who had stolen the shovel to step forward or he would have everyone shot. Just as it seemed that the commander was about to give the order to shoot, a man stepped forward. The man was taken away and shot. The next morning, the shovels were recounted and found to be all there--the guard had miscounted. The man who stepped forward truly substituted himself for his friends even though he was not guilty of the crime. Jesus did this for us.¹⁴

In closing, I would like to leave you with a song by Truth. The name of the song is “Holy of Holies.” It speaks first about the Old Testament ark of the covenant and then tells what Jesus did for us that makes that holy place accessible to us today. Because of the atoning work of Jesus Christ, we can be at one with God, have all the benefits of the atonement, and have access to the holy of holies.

ENDNOTES

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

²Edwin B. Williams, The Scribner-Bantam English Dictionary, ed. Edwin B. Williams (New York: Bantam, 1979), p. 60.

³Williams, p. 755.

⁴Millard J. Erickson, Introducing Christian Doctrine, ed. L. Arnold Hustad (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), p. 248.

⁵Erickson, p. 242.

⁶Erickson, p. 242.

⁷Erickson, p. 243.

⁸Erickson, p. 243.

⁹Erickson, p. 243.

¹⁰Erickson, p. 243-44.

¹¹Erickson, p. 244.

¹²Erickson, p. 251.

¹³Erickson, p. 251-52.

¹⁴Robin Keeley, Eerdmans' Handbook to Christian Belief, ed. Robin Keeley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 327.

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