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ATONEMENT THEORIES

There are several major models of the atonement that have been held by assorted Christian groups at various times. While we do not believe any of these explains the primary purpose of the cross, a position we reserve for penal substitution, some of the views have a measure of biblical support and, when not pushed to the place of preeminence, enhance our understanding of the atonement.

The Example (or Moral Influence) Theory: There is no doubt that this is the most widely held view among old school liberals and emergents (new school liberals). The idea is that the death of Christ serves as the perfect example of love and Christians therefore are to emulate Christ's love. Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the most recognized popularizers of this theory among liberals in the first half of the 20th century, decried those who taught penal substitution as promoters of a "slaughterhouse religion."

Christus Victor Theory: *Christus Victor*, or Christ the Victor, "argues that humanity's main problem is that we are trapped and oppressed by

spiritual forces beyond our control. Christ's death, then, is seen as a ransom that frees us from captivity. His death and resurrection defeats the evil spiritual forces."³

This view has become popular today, especially in the Ancient-Future Faith movement and among those who take the New Perspective on Paul seriously.

Ransom Theory: This understanding is a subset of *Christus Victor* with the addition that, "At the cross, God handed Jesus over to Satan in exchange for the souls of humans held captive to Satan. Satan believed he could hold Jesus in death, but the resurrection proved him wrong as Jesus triumphed over Satan."⁴

Powerful Weakness Theory: Emergent leader Brian McLaren articulates this interpretation, which fits well with his worldview. According to Trevor Craigen, who warns against the dark side of emergent soteriology, the lead character in McLaren's fictional trilogy:

"...sees Jesus becoming vulnerable on the cross and accepting suffering from every one, Jew and Roman, and not visiting suffering on everyone in some sort of revenge. It puts on display God's

When Brian McLaren, Steve Chalke, and Alan Mann accused Evangelicals who believed in the substitutionary death of Christ of embracing a form of divine child abuse,¹ Christians everywhere did a double-take. Having sung with gusto for years that great line penned by Charles Wesley, "Amazing love, how can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me," Christians could not believe that they were being accused of promoting child abuse by men who claimed to be at least on the fringes of the evangelical community. What McLaren and Chalke had done was bring to the surface for all to see the longstanding debate by theologians about the meaning of the cross.

Almost no one in Christian circles doubts the historicity of the crucifixion, but *why Christ died* has long been contested. Of late, due to the rising popularity of everything from the emergent church to the Ancient-Future Faith movement to the New Perspective on Paul, the significance of Christ's cross-work, often called the atonement, has regained traction. In particular what has often been called "penal substitution," that the Son, "suffer[ed] instead of us the death, punishment and curse due to fallen humanity as the penalty for sin"² has come under intense attack.

loving heart which wants forgiveness, not vengeance. ... God rejects the violence, dominance, and oppression which have so gripped the world from the time of Cain and Abel until today's news headlines. The call of the cross is for mankind not to make the Kingdom come about through coercion but 'to welcome it through self sacrifice and vulnerability.'"5

Healing Theory: Popular among certain branches of Pentecostalism and at the heart of the prosperity gospel (Word-Faith movement) is the idea that not only did Christ's death provide for our salvation from sin but also physical healing is available in the atonement by request in this present life. Ultimately it is true that because of Christ's death the redeemed will be given glorified bodies free from all illness and suffering, however those clinging to the healing theory insist that such health and well-being are obtainable in this present life.

Satisfaction Theory: The satisfaction view is similar to penal substitution except that it understands Christ's death as a compensation for the honor of a holy God wounded by sin. The Son's death satisfied that offense to God's honor. Penal substitution, on the other hand, sees the issue as God's law in which "sin is primarily a violation of God's law, thus Christ's death pays the penalty for sins that God's holiness requires."⁶

Penal Substitution: Pastor and author Mark Dever explains that "our main problem is God's righteous wrath against us for our sinfulness, which puts us in danger of eternal punishment. ... Christ's perfect sacrifice for our sins is necessary to satisfy God's righteousness. Christ's death bore a divine penalty that we deserved. By taking our penalty upon himself, God satisfied his own correct and good wrath against us."⁷

WHAT SAY THE SCRIPTURES?

Before we examine penal substitution in detail we need to give some careful and detailed attention to two

of the above theories, moral influence and *Christus Victor*, because of their popularity and because they have supplanted penal substitution in some theological spheres.

Concerning the moral influence theory, let's begin by gladly admitting that Christ's death serves as the greatest example of self-sacrificing love the world has ever seen. In addition, the New Testament points to this selfless act and tells us to live in like manner (Philippians 2:5-8).

Peter Abelard, who lived from 1079 to 1142 and was among the first to clearly articulate this view, taught:

"The work of Christ chiefly consists of demonstrating to the world the amazing depth of God's love for sinful humanity. The atonement was directed primarily at humanity, not God. There is nothing inherent in God that must be appeased before he is willing to forgive sinful humanity. ... Through the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ, the love of God shines like a beacon, beckoning humanity to come and fellowship."⁸

Yet the question needs to be asked: In what sense was Christ's death a demonstration of love? If Christ died randomly, without purpose, the cross is not an example of love at all. A person who steps in front of a car for no reason has not displayed love but foolishness. On the other hand, if one steps in front of a car to save another person's life, that death would be an example of self-sacrificing love. Likewise, for Christ's death to be an exhibition of love it would necessitate that He die accomplishing something of great value for others. That something, Scripture tells us, is paying the penalty for our sins as we are told in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

By ignoring this simple reasoning and scriptural teaching, a large segment of Christendom has limited the cross-work to Christ merely setting

for us an example of love which we are to follow.

Abelard's view was later condemned by the Church and he was excommunicated, but his theory, in one form or another, has lived on. Most prominently we find this interpretation revived and updated in the modern liberal movement originating in the 18th century. The recognized fathers of so-called modernism were Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889). These men and their followers sought to accommodate the teachings of Christianity to the worldview of those living in the time of the Enlightenment. The idea of a sacrifice for sin seemed barbaric and unsophisticated to the civilized mind, but that Jesus would offer us the perfect example of love — one which we were to emulate — played well with many.

It does not appear that Schleiermacher and Ritschl actually intended at first to circumvent the more conservative understandings of the Bible; they sought to update doctrine to make it more palatable to modern thinkers. But once the foundations of biblical truth were undermined, other doctrines began to fall through the cracks until not much was left of the Christian faith. One of the fundamental doctrines to suffer was that of the cross. Liberals could not easily deny that Jesus historically died on the cross — although some have done so today — but they could reframe the purpose of the cross. Man's great need was not redemption, not salvation from sin, not rescue from the wrath of God, but love. We need to love one another or else we will destroy the world and everything in it. But what does love look like? Christ came to show us. While the biblically-informed Christian would see this theory as incomplete, a Hindu such as Mahatma Gandhi would have no problem with this kind of sacrifice. He said, "His death on the cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept."⁹

One of the real problems with the moral influence theory is that it does

not take sin seriously and therefore sees no remedy — nor any need for one — for guilt and judgment. Historian Tony Lane writes with respect to a main concern of this interpretation:

“Schleiermacher’s concept of the work of Jesus Christ is too low, because of his inadequate view of human sinfulness — he has very little to say about guilt before God, for instance. Jesus Christ came not to atone for sin but to be our teacher, to set us an example. His work is essentially to arouse in us the consciousness of God. ... The work of Jesus Christ, as perceived by Schleiermacher, makes his resurrection, ascension into heaven and second coming superfluous.”¹⁰

It is no wonder that H. Richard Niebuhr famously described liberal theology as “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”¹¹

Liberalism eventually permeated all the major denominations and ultimately defined most of them. As a result, liberal denominations today are on the decline as people have increasingly recognized that they have nothing more to offer than other benevolent organizations and social agencies. But in the 21st century a new brand of liberalism has arisen that has caught the interest of many. This is often called the emergent movement with leaders such as Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, and Doug Pagitt.

The emergent movement is essentially saying the same thing that old liberalism did, except that they are repackaging their message for a post-modern generation rather than a philosophically modern one. For example, where the Enlightenment proclaimed that truth could be found not in revelation but in the self, in reason, and in the scientific method, post-modernity can offer little more than uncertainty. Absolute, universal truth, the postmodern claims, is a myth.

Those within Christendom who have imbibed postmodern thinking

might not totally dismiss the concept of truth, but they have embraced uncertainty. Truth may exist but there is no way that we can be certain what it is. And if we did there would be no means of communicating it to others. When this mindset is transferred to the atonement we are delivered a diluted and contradictory message. The great accomplishments of the atonement as found in Scripture are banished, for they offend the sensibilities of 21st-century people. Nevertheless, while we can be certain that Christ did not die to satisfy the wrath of God or to defeat evil forces — so we are told — we can be certain that the cross gives us a powerful example of love. How the emergents, who deny certainty, can be so certain of this is not clear.

There is enough truth in what the liberals and emergents were/are saying to be confusing to some. Love is certainly the chief of the virtues. It is an attribute of God, and it was a motivation behind the incarnation and the cross (John 3:16). But while Christ came motivated by His great love, He came to provide more than an example of love. The real problem facing the human race is its alienation from a holy God who is righteously wrathful toward sinners. There was no remedy to this condition found within man or the world around him. The only solution rested in God. But God could not simply love man to Himself and ignore his sins. God had to provide a means of deliverance that was consistent with His own holy nature and which satisfied His wrath toward sin and sinners. This necessitated the sacrificial death of Christ.

CHRISTUS VICTOR

Robert Webber, father of the Ancient-Future Faith movement, tries to establish that *Christus Victor* was the primary interpretation of the atonement for the first millennium of Church history.¹²

This view, in its present form, stems from a book by that name written by Gustaf Aulen in 1930. Aulen sought to offer an opposing view to the traditional understanding that Christ died to satisfy God’s justice and to make us

acceptable to Him. But he wanted to move beyond the theory that Christ died to change our attitude toward God and provide us with an example of pure love. Aulen saw Christ’s death as a means by which the Lord battled with and conquered the evil forces of this world, principally Satan and his demons.¹³

Christus Victor has much to commend it, most important of which is that it has biblical backing. One of the most consistent teachings in the Scriptures is that the Lamb of God came to set us free from all the corrupting, polluting, destructive, and enslaving powers that reign over mankind (Colossians 1:13-14). This includes sin, death, and Satan. Only the power of Christ through the cross can liberate us from such enemies and the Scriptures provide ample evidence that this is one of the reasons Christ died.

Biblical support for *Christus Victor* includes Colossians 2:15: “Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.” But the means by which Christ triumphed over these spiritual powers was by dying in our place and taking our penalty upon Himself. Verse 14 reads, “having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” Therefore, without denying Christ’s victory over satanic forces at the cross, penal substitution remains central. Were it not for Jesus taking our sins upon Himself and paying our penalty, no victory would have been realized.

Hebrews 2:14-15 also supports this theory. “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.” And 1 John 3:8 is also helpful. “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.” Without question, in the atonement

Christ won a great victory over the forces of evil.

Unfortunately some take this interpretation too far. Webber explains *Christus Victor*:

- At the cross the power of Satan was dethroned. Christ's death exposed Satan's lies so that people can be set free from his illusions.
- At the consummation Satan's influence over the powers will be destroyed.
- Between the resurrection and the consummation Satan's powers have been limited.
- Creation ultimately will be reconciled to God.
- As for now, the kingdom of God, God's rule over all things, is manifested.¹⁴

As presently understood by men such as Webber, Satan still has power over this world but it is greatly limited. Therefore, according to this theory, the kingdom of God is here now, which leads to some very practical applications. Webber writes:

"Faith in Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate ruler over all of life, can break the twisting of political, economic, social, and moral structures into *secular salvation*. Because those structures that promise secular salvation are disarmed, they can no longer exercise ultimate power in our lives. The powers have been dethroned by the power of the cross."¹⁵

Why *Christus Victor* has gained popularity among emerging adherents and others who see the Gospel as including a social element is obvious. If the cross is designed to presently correct social, political, and economic structures, then the mission of the Church is to right the injustices in our world. We need not wait for the King to come to bring His kingdom because it is here. Our job is to administer His kingdom now in preparation for the final stage of the kingdom coming to earth. This understanding of the atonement radically transforms

the overall purpose of God's people from that of the Great Commission to the Cultural Mandate of fixing the planet. As Brian McLaren states:

"Jesus came to launch an insurgency to overthrow that occupying regime [a reference to aggression and injustice throughout the planet]. Its goal is to resist the occupation, liberate the planet, and retrain and restore humanity to its original vocation and potential. This renewed humanity can return to its role as caretakers of creation and one another so the planet and all it contains can be restored to the healthy and fruitful harmony that God desires."¹⁶

A mistake is often made when theologians attempt to force us to choose between the three main interpretations of the atonement. In fact, all three have biblical support and help explain the multifaceted beauty of Christ's great cross-work. The late John R.W. Stott expresses this truth well when he writes:

"In fact all three of the major explanations of the death of Christ contain biblical truth and can to some extent be harmonized, especially if we observe that the chief difference between them is that in each God's work in Christ is directed toward a different person. In the 'objective' view God satisfies himself, in the 'subjective' he inspires us, and in the 'classic' he overcomes the devil. Thus Jesus Christ is successively the Savior, the Teacher and the Victor, because we ourselves are guilty, apathetic and in bondage."¹⁷

While this is true, nevertheless the penal substitution of Christ is central, both in Scripture and in relationship to our salvation. Because the central teaching of Scripture in regard to Christ's cross-work is best defined as the penal substitutionary atonement (PSA), it is not surprising that it is facing resistance from many who would be happy to embrace the cross as a moral example of love or a victory over the forces of evil. Yet the

Bible teaches that while Christ's death was a great example and resulted in the defeat of evil forces, more importantly His death was necessary in order that our sins might be forgiven and we be reconciled to God.

UNDERSTANDING PENAL SUBSTITUTION

Theologian Wayne Grudem provides this helpful definition:

"Christ's death was 'penal' in that he bore a penalty when he died. His death was also a 'substitution' in that he was a substitute for us when he died. This has been the orthodox understanding of the atonement held by evangelical theologians, in contrast to other views that attempt to explain the atonement apart from the idea of the wrath of God or payment of the penalty for sin."¹⁸

Millard Erickson wrote, "The idea that Christ's death is a sacrifice offered in payment of the penalty for our sins [sic]. It is accepted by the Father as satisfaction in place of the penalty due to us."¹⁹

He refines the doctrine writing, "By offering himself as a sacrifice, by substituting himself for us, actually bearing the punishment that should have been ours, Jesus appeased the Father and effected a reconciliation between God and humanity."²⁰

Mark Dever, in an article, explains that PSA has come under attack in modern times for a number of supposed reasons such as:

- It is a medieval doctrine not found in Scripture.
- It is irrelevant and does not make sense to modern cultures because it glorifies abusive behavior.
- It is too individualistic, focusing on individual guilt and forgiveness while ignoring the bigger issues of social justice.
- And it is too violent, requiring of God a violence for redemption that He would condemn in humans.²¹

This final criticism of PSA has received much attention of late because of some blunt and shocking statements from a few claiming credentials in evangelicalism. For example, Joel B. Green and Mark D. Barker recently wrote *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* in which they reject any notion of divine wrath besides that of allowing people to go their own way. They say, "The Scriptures as a whole ... provide no ground for a portrait of an angry God needing to be appeased in atoning sacrifice." PSA, therefore, is rejected as ridiculous, and as apparent proof Green and Barker cite a boy in Sunday school who said, "Jesus I like, but the Father seems pretty mean. ... Why is God so angry?"²²

In similar fashion McLaren places the following words in the mouth of the main character in his fictional works: "if God wants to forgive us, why doesn't he just do it? How does punishing an innocent person make things better? That just sounds like one more injustice in the cosmic equation. It sounds like divine child abuse. You know?"²³

OLD TESTAMENT SUPPORT

While PSA of Christ comes into focus in the New Testament scriptures, the Old Testament clearly points to this truth through at least four means:

- The Passover at the time of the Exodus provided a glorious picture of what would ultimately be fulfilled in Christ (Exodus 12:3-13). Just as a lamb would be killed and its blood applied to the entryway of Jewish homes so that the inhabitants of those homes would be spared physically, so the Lamb of God would shed His blood so that we would be spared spiritually and given eternal life.

- On the Jewish Day of Atonement the lives of two goats would be substituted for the sins of the people. One goat was sacrificed and slain on the altar; the other, the scapegoat, would symbolically take away the sins of the people as it was released into the wilderness (Leviticus 16). So Christ would not only die for our sins but take them away as well.

- The direct prophecy of Isaiah foretelling the fact of Christ dying for us, in our place, and is stated nine times (Isaiah 53:4-6, 8, 11-12).

- Finally, PSA is clearly depicted in the whole sacrificial system in which animals were sacrificed as substitutes for men and women who deserved death because of sin.

NEW TESTAMENT SUPPORT

While the Old Testament sacrificial system provided marvelous shadows and symbols of the work of Christ, they were incapable of covering man's sin, for "it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). True atonement would necessitate a greater sacrifice, a more acceptable substitute than anything known previously. It would take the substitutionary death of the Son of God to fully expiate sin. While the sins of Old Testament saints were truly taken away and forgiven prior to the cross, such was made possible only on the basis of what would ultimately happen at the cross. All the Old Testament ceremonies pointed to the One who could provide salvation by meeting the righteous demands of a holy God. Animals could not meet those demands, nor could man do anything to satisfy God's justice — only the Son could do so. We need to take a look at what the New Testament actually teaches at this point.

As Our Substitute. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5:21, wrote, "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Some have termed this "The Great Exchange" as the Sinless One took our sin upon Himself and gave us the righteousness of God. The implication is that this spiritual transaction is made possible only through the sacrifice of Christ.

First Peter 2:24 adds, "who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness; by whose stripes you were healed." Christ then became sin on our behalf (in our place) at the cross, for it is there that He bore our sin in His

body. He did so to free us from sin and bring us righteousness, but our healing was made possible only because of His wounds. First Peter 3:18 says, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God."

In Romans 5:8 Paul writes, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Christ's death was "for us." His death accomplished what nothing else could. Jesus Himself speaks of penal substitution when He states that He came "to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). And John the Baptist declared Jesus as "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

One of our best hymn writers, Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), expressed it well:

"'Twas I that shed the sacred blood; I nailed him to the tree; I crucified the Christ of God; I joined the mockery. Of all that shouting multitude I feel that I am one; And in that din of voices rude I recognize my own. Around the cross the throng I see, Mocking the Sufferer's groan; Yet still my voice it seems to be, As if I mocked alone."²⁴

Propitiation. While the *Christus Victor* and moral influence views of the atonement have biblical validity, neither adequately handles the Godward side of the atonement issues. That Christ died to set us free from the bondage of sin, death, and Satan and that He died to provide for us an example of perfect love, explains important facets of Christ's death. However neither of these views, or any others except PSA, addresses why the death of Christ was necessary from God's perspective. Yet Scripture teaches that God is righteously angry at sin and therefore His wrath and judgment is being, and will eternally be, poured out on sinners who have not had their sins cleansed and forgiven.

At issue is the fact that God is just in His judgment of sinners and, being

holy, He cannot ignore our sin and accept us as we are. Something must take place that satisfies the righteous anger of God. That something is termed propitiation in the Scriptures. At the cross, Christ took upon Himself the righteous wrath of God that sinners deserve in order that He might appease the anger of God against sin and sinners.

Propitiation is foreign to the minds of modern people and often confused with pagan concepts. Pagans, both of biblical times and today, see propitiation as an act of man to keep vengeful and mean-spirited deities off their backs. These deities are often seen as anything but holy. As a matter of fact, they are viewed as super-sinners out for themselves. To keep them happy, or to secure their favor, pagans will sacrifice something of great value to them personally. The Hollywood picture of tossing a virgin into a volcano to please the gods and thus obtain victory in battle or to produce rain is one that comes readily to mind of many.

To speak of the true God as needing this pagan kind of sacrifice is offensive to God and perplexing to us. Therefore it is important to understand that biblical propitiation differs in at least two ways. In pagan sacrifice, man is doing something to please the gods. In Christ's sacrifice, God has done something to satisfy His own righteousness. In pagan propitiation, an evil, spiteful deity demands that his unholy appetites be met, while in Christ's death the holiness of God is at stake. At issue with God is how can He who is infinitely holy accept people who are deeply corrupt and sinful? Something must take place to enable God to be holy and at the same time accepting of sinners. At Christ's death, the holy nature of God was satisfied in order that sinners redeemed by the blood of Christ could be received by Him.

Still propitiation is difficult to swallow for many, which might explain why many modern English translations have replaced "propitiation" with such terms as "expiation" or "atoning sacrifice," even though the

proper translation for the Greek word *hilasmos* is unquestionably "propitiation." Rightly understood, however, the concept of propitiation gives the salvation process the fullness it deserves. Taking a look at a few terms will be helpful:

Expiation: This is a fancy term that means that God has taken away our sins — they have been removed from us. Such removal of sin was made possible only through the substitutionary death of Christ. Isaiah 53:12 prophesies that the Messiah would bear the sins of many. Christ "put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself ... Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many" (Hebrews 9:26, 28), and He has "washed us from our sins in His own blood" (Revelation 1:5). Expiation is directed at our sin; propitiation is directed at God's holiness. Expiation purges us from sin; propitiation satisfies God's just anger toward the sinner.

Propitiation: J.I. Packer writes, "It is a sacrifice that averts wrath through expiating sin, and cancelling guilt."²⁵

Through propitiation the divine wrath is averted from us and placed on Christ. The way Thomas Schreiner frames the issue is helpful:

"Modern people tend to ask, 'How can God send anyone to hell?' Paul asks a completely different question because he thinks theocentrically and not anthropocentrically. He asks how can God refrain from punishing people immediately and fully."²⁶

Reconciliation: David Clotfelter provides us with a very useful distinction:

"If expiation is the removal of our guilt, and propitiation the removal of God's wrath, reconciliation is the consequent renewal of relationship between God and us. Because we are no longer regarded as guilty and are no longer objects of wrath, there is now no barrier to hinder us from coming to God and experiencing peace with Him. ... The death of Jesus has opened the way for God to embrace those

from whom He was previously estranged by their sin."²⁷

Redemption: "Propitiation focuses on the wrath of God which was placated by the cross; redemption on the plight of sinners from which they were ransomed by the cross."²⁸

Apologist James White makes this distinction:

"Redemption contemplates our bondage and is the provision of grace to release us from that bondage. Propitiation contemplates our liability to the wrath of God and is the provision of grace whereby we may be freed from that wrath."²⁹

Justification: John R.W. Stott writes that justification "will take us into the court of law. For justification is the opposite of condemnation (e.g., Rom 5:18; 8:34), and both are verdicts of a judge who pronounces the accused either guilty or not guilty. ... Forgiveness remits our debts and cancels our liability to punishment; justification bestows on us a righteous standing before God."³⁰

OTHER IMPORTANT SCRIPTURES

In the book *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, the authors offer this interpretation of Romans 3:21-26, which is faithful to the context and direction Paul has taken his readers:

"All people are sinners, whether Jew or Gentile, but all may be justified through faith in Jesus. For God, who in the past had left his people's sin unpunished, has now demonstrated his justice by punishing their sin in Christ. He was set forth as a 'sacrifice of atonement' (literally, 'a propitiation', v. 25), turning aside God's wrath by suffering it himself in the place of his people."³¹

In the flow of Paul's argument, he has used most of the first three chapters of Romans to demonstrate the condemnation that mankind is under because of sin. Perhaps the key verse has been 1:18 wherein we find that God's wrath is poured out

against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. As Paul brings this section of his great epistle to a close, he shows the hopeless condition of sinful humanity by telling us that even the Law of God was unable to purify us from sin, for the Law was only able to reveal sin and thereby condemn us and hold us accountable before a holy God (Romans 3:19-20).

It would take something even greater than the Law to satisfy the wrath of God against sin and redeem us from its power. It would take something that could allow God to both justify unworthy sinners and at the same time maintain the justice and holiness of God (v. 26). Only the sacrifice of the Son of God could do both. Christ died in our stead, taking upon Himself the full wrath of God that we deserved. God's sentence against sin was fully carried out on Christ so that we might be redeemed. In verses 24-25 we read, "being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness." This is the doctrine of penal substitution.

Thomas Schreiner argues that Galatians 3:10-14 plows much the same ground. In verse 10 Paul writes, "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse." "How can such a curse be removed?" Schreiner asks. "Not by Christ's good example. Not merely by Christ defeating demonic powers. Not merely by God healing our damaged souls. Galatians 3:13 answers the question posed: 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us — for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree."' The curse we deserved was borne by Christ."³²

Galatians 1:4 reads, "[Christ] gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father." Christ voluntarily died for our sins in order to rescue us. Nothing but the great sacrifice could set us free.

In Hebrews 2:17 we find this affirmation of PSA, "He had to be made

like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." Christ's high priestly ministry directly targets the need for our sins to be propitiated. Under the Old Testament system, the Jewish high priest would sacrifice animals to atone for the sins of people and temporarily appease the wrath of God against those sins. But final removal of those sins, as well as ours, would await the perfect sacrifice at the cross. The difference was not so much in the methodology used as it was in the sacrifice itself. The weakness in the Mosaic system was that the animals sacrificed were not capable of taking away sin (Hebrews 10:1-4). A final, once-for-all, holy sacrifice was needed to pay for our sins.

The Apostle John, while not dealing as intently or directly with the doctrine of substitution, is not hesitant to speak of propitiation. In 1 John 2:2 he writes, "And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world." Again, in chapter 4 verse 10, we read, "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."

Other scriptural passages of note include:

Titus 2:14: "Who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works."

Ephesians 2:13: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."

And few texts are clearer on the subject than Isaiah 53:4-6: "Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows ... But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

Although there is helpful truth to be found in some of the other atonement theories, especially *Christus Victor* and moral influence, the central theme of redemptive theology as found in Scripture is that salvation could be made possible only through a perfect sacrifice that could not only redeem us from sin and declare us justified (righteous), but could also satisfy God's holy wrath against sin.

While many substitutes have been suggested, such as our own merit by keeping the Law or through the death of animals under the prescribed Old Testament sacrificial system, none of these would do. Paul, who confessed to trying these other means, gloried in the fact that because of Christ his righteousness was "not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith" (Philippians 3:9).

Endnotes:

1. See further Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003, pp. 102ff; and Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003, pg. 182.
2. Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions, Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2007, pg. 21.
3. Mark Dever, "Nothing But the Blood," *Christianity Today*, website article, posted May 1, 2006. Document accessed at: www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/may/9.29.html.
4. Michael J. Vlach, "Penal Substitution in Church History," *The Master's Seminary Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 2, pg. 201.
5. Trevor P. Craigen, "Emergent Soteriology: The Dark Side," *The Master's Seminary Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pg. 185, italics in original. Craigen cites McLaren's *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, op. cit., pp. 105-106.
6. "Penal Substitution in Church History," op. cit., pg. 203.
7. "Nothing But the Blood," op. cit.
8. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, Editors, *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press (IVP Academic), 2006, pg. 19.
9. Gandhi cited by Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Death by Love: Letters from the Cross*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2008, pg. 20.
10. Tony Lane, *A Concise History of Chris-*

tian Thought. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006, pg. 240.

11. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*. New York: Harper and Row, 1959, pg. 193. This statement is also cited in "H. Richard Niebuhr" on Wikipedia. Document accessed at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._Richard_Niebuhr.

12. Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999, pp. 43-44.

13. See *A Concise History of Christian Thought*, op. cit., pp. 279-281.

14. *Ancient-Future Faith*, op. cit., pp. 50-55.

15. *Ibid.*, pg. 51, emphasis added.

16. Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007, pg. 129.

17. John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press,

2006, pg. 226.

18. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994, pg. 579.

19. Erickson cited by Richard Mayhue, "The Scriptural Necessity of Christ's Penal Substitution," *The Master's Theological Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 2, pg. 140.

20. Erickson cited by Vlach, "Penal Substitution in Church History," op. cit., pp. 200-201.

21. "Nothing But the Blood," op. cit.

22. Green and Barker cited by David Wells, *Above all Earthly Pow'rs*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005, pg. 219, first ellipses added, second in original.

23. *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, op. cit., pg. 102.

24. Horatius Bonar, "'Twas I That Shed the Sacred Blood," cited in *The Cross of*

Christ, op. cit., pg. 63.

25. J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973, pg. 141.

26. Schreiner in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, op. cit., pg. 88.

27. Dave Clotfelter, *Sinners in the Hands of a Good God, Reconciling Divine Judgment and Mercy*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004, pg. 196.

28. *The Cross of Christ*, op. cit., pg. 173.

29. James R. White, *The God Who Justifies*. Bloomington, Minn.: Bethany House, 2001, pg. 195.

30. *The Cross of Christ*, op. cit., pp. 179-180.

31. *Pierced for Our Transgressions, Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution*, op. cit., pg. 80.

32. Schreiner in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, op. cit., pg. 89.

THE APE OF GOD

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him in the wilderness of temptation. He is a spirit and can influence men.

The Lord's soldiers do not carry guns because the battle is not with men. We fight against "spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). It is unfortunate that some of God's soldiers make Christ's war a war against men, against "flesh and blood" (Ephesians 6:12). When there is a doctrinal disagreement between two believers, they will often part company angry and bitter. The Christian call to battle is not a call against men, but *for* men and *against* Satan. We fight for God and truth; against error and sin. It is a terrible thing when Christians forget who their enemy is.

We are at war against unbelief, but are to love unbelievers. We are at war with heresy, but we do not hate heretics. There are false teachers spreading damnable lies, but we earnestly pray for them. We are opposed to everything that rises up against God and His truth, but toward every man we endeavor to obey Christ's command to "love your enemies."

DISARMING THE CHURCH

Spiritual formation, contemplative prayer, centering prayer, soaking

prayer, breath prayer, the silence, labyrinth, and "Christian yoga" might all sound familiar to readers of *The Quarterly Journal*. And these "disciplines" are appearing in churches across America. Under the guise of faith-producing techniques, New Age spirituality has been woven into the fabric of numerous church prayer, youth, and Christian education programs. These practices, of which most believers do not realize are a counterfeit to Christianity, are seen by many as aids to Christian living.

The "Bible thumping," as they say, of traditional evangelicalism and the superficiality of pragmatic or seeker-friendly evangelicalism have given way to a new trend in Christian churches. Eastern style meditation, labyrinths, and "Christian yoga" are the "in" thing. The train headed for the East has left the station and many of evangelicalism's biggest names are on board: Max Lucado, Beth Moore, Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, and Henry Cloud, just to name a few. On a DVD by Fox Home Entertainment entitled *Be Still and Know That I Am God*, they are promoting a New Age practice rooted firmly in Buddhist and Hindu tradition called contemplative or centering prayer. The DVD features "interviews with some of today's most highly respected authors, pastors, and educators."² Others on the contemplative bandwagon, not

included in the DVD, are Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, and others of the emergent conversation.

Many Christians have never heard of the New Age contemplative prayer movement. Nevertheless, many believers are practicing or know someone who is practicing its teachings even though they may not be familiar with the terms. It is also referred to as contemplative spirituality or the spiritual formation movement. Spiritual formation refers to the use of Eastern mystical techniques to experience greater spiritual growth and an intimate union with Christ.

THE DESERT FATHERS OF EGYPT

The spiritual formation movement is widely seen as the way to satisfy the spiritual hunger of postmodern man. From books, magazine articles, conferences, sermons, and seminary courses by popular Christians, spiritual formation or contemplative spirituality is the "new" thing. To the average church-goer it is the new and contemporary word for discipleship. It is said to be essential to progressive sanctification. But spiritual formation is not the same as discipleship or progressive sanctification.

The contemplative spirituality movement has its roots in the Middle