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## Philosophical Reflects on the Atonement

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# **Philosophical Reflections on the Atonement: How Do Christ's Life, Death, and Resurrection Put Us Right With God?**

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## Philosophical Reflections on the Atonement

According to the Christian faith, we can be put into a harmonious relationship with God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; in essence, this is the doctrine of the Atonement. While this doctrine has been preached from the earliest days of the church, it raises a number of questions Christian thinkers have struggled to answer. For example, Christians say that Christ died for our sins, but how could someone's death put us right with God? And was Christ's horrible death on the cross really necessary for our salvation?

In what follows I want to consider some of the historically influential attempts to explain the doctrine of the atonement. These attempts to explain the doctrine are called *theories* of the atonement. I will set forth three criteria that I believe any viable theory of the atonement must meet. Given these criteria, we shall see that the historically influential theories are all problematic. Finally, I will propose a theory that, I believe, avoids many of the problems of the historical theories. Of course, you'll be the judge of whether my proposal is just as problematic (or perhaps even more so)!

### I. Mystery

I realize that many Christians regard the distinctive teachings of Christianity, such as the Atonement, Incarnation, and Trinity, as mysteries. And from this perspective, isn't it a mistake, perhaps even irreverent, to attempt to think logically and rationally about these matters?

In one sense I agree that these great doctrines are mysteries. We can never hope to understand them fully. But in this sense of the word I find myself surrounded by mysteries in every area of my thinking. Partial understanding (which comes in degrees) is the best we humans can

generally hope for. But it surely does not follow that it's wrong to try to understand things as best we can.

There are, however, more worrisome uses of the word "mystery." First, sometimes people use it when, in thinking about something, they contradict themselves, or run into a conflict with plain fact. In such cases, simply throwing up one's hands and "pulling the mystery card" seems to me a cop out--a refusal to admit a problem in one's thinking. Second, in my experience, the question, "Isn't that supposed to be a mystery?" is often used to put a stop to a discussion that has barely started. But how can we hope to understand doctrines better if we aren't even willing to discuss them? Third, sometimes people advance a theory, but then when objections are raised, they appeal to mystery. Since the point of a theory is precisely to explain things, appealing to mystery in this context seems to me inappropriate. The proper response would simply be to admit that the theory is apparently deficient to some extent. Finally, in relegating the great Christian doctrines to the category of unexamined mysteries, there is a danger that we will pay them lip service while leaving them largely inoperative in how we think and feel.

My own view is that we can never know in advance whether (or to what extent) we can understand something. We can only find out by trying hard to understand it. And so, in what follows, I want to try to think hard about the doctrine of the Atonement.

## II. Historical Background

It's very important to distinguish between the *doctrine* of the Atonement and the various *theories* of the Atonement. The doctrine of the Atonement simply says that we are *somehow* put right with God through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The doctrine of the Atonement is explicitly taught in the New Testament and indeed it was preached before the New Testament



was written. By contrast, a *theory* of the Atonement is an attempt to explain, in clarifying detail, *how and why* Christ's life, death, and resurrection put us right with God. No theory of the Atonement is set forth in the New Testament, nor is any theory of the Atonement endorsed in any of the great creeds, such as the Nicene Creed. So, I believe this is an area in which there is room for Christian thinkers to try out new ideas.

A few brief notes regarding the history of thought about the atonement will, I believe, help us get oriented. I am by no means an expert in the history of Christian theology, but here's a very rough and partial sketch of some relevant parts of that history, for present purposes.<sup>1</sup> For the first couple centuries of church history, there was little theorizing about the Atonement. Christian thinkers were content to let Scriptural quotations and analogies speak for themselves. But gradually there was a felt need for more by way of explanation. Appropriately enough, the early Christian thinkers latched onto the Scriptural analogies of sacrifice and ransom as their main guides. Less appropriately, they sometimes tended to take these ideas quite literally. Thus, the Ransom Theory emerged, roughly the idea that by sinning, we humans sold ourselves into captivity to the Devil, and God offered Christ's death as the ransom-payment to free us. But through Christ's resurrection--which the Devil did not anticipate, Christ was freed from the Devil's clutches. Versions of this theory were held by Origen, Augustine, and Gregory of Nyssa. In *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement*, L. W. Grensted remarks that theories of the Atonement "based upon the idea of a transaction between God and the devil" stood "for nine hundred years as the ordinary exposition of the fact of the Atonement."<sup>2</sup>

Anselm (d. 1109) rejected the Ransom Theory and proposed his Satisfaction Theory, which in barest outline runs as follows: We owe God, our Creator, lives of perfect obedience. Obviously, we've failed to live perfectly obedient lives, and so we are in God's debt. God can't simply forgive

us because God's honor and justice require that we either pay the debt or be punished for failing to pay it. Because of our past sins, we cannot pay the debt, but fortunately Christ paid the debt for us by living a perfect life and accepting death—a death that was for Christ, who was sinless, beyond the call of duty. Anselm's theory became very influential.<sup>3</sup>

Reformers such as Calvin and Melancthon proposed the Punishment Theory. Grensted remarks that "Before the Reformation only a few hints of a Penal [Punishment] theory can be found. After the Reformation it becomes common ground for the great majority of Protestant writers."<sup>4</sup> On this view, God cannot simply forgive sin because God's justice demands that all sin be punished to the full extent of desert. But fortunately for us, Christ voluntarily took the punishment in our place. This may sound a bit like Anselm's view, but it's importantly different. On Anselm's view, Christ is not punished at all; rather, he pays the debt we owe. On the Reformer's view, Christ takes the punishment we deserve.

The Punishment Theory remains influential today. Interestingly, in a recent, popular Christian movie, *Courageous* (by the creators of *Fireproof*, *Flywheel*, and *Facing the Giants*), the Punishment Theory is simply offered as the gospel. But many Christian thinkers nowadays are more influenced by a theory Abelard offered in the middle ages, his Moral Influence Theory. On this view, Christ reconciles us to God simply through the kind of life he lived, a life that provides an inspirational example of holy love.<sup>5</sup> Abelard's theory has been very influential in modern times, especially among those who find the Punishment, Satisfaction, and Ransom theories unacceptable.

In his famous book, *Christus Victor*, Gustaf Aulén divided theories of the Atonement into three general types. First, the Latin type: In these theories, Christ's atoning work satisfies God's justice as a precondition for divine forgiveness. Anselm's Satisfaction Theory and the Punishment Theory belong to this type. Second, the Subjective type: According to Aulén, these theories explain

“the Atonement as consisting essentially in a change taking place in men rather than a changed attitude on the part of God.”<sup>6</sup> Aulén places Abelard’s Moral Influence in this category. Third, the Christus Victor type of theory, which claims that through his life, death, and resurrection, Christ won a victory over the forces of evil. The Ransom Theory is an example of this type.

I hope these brief comments on the history of Christian thinking about the Atonement will help us keep our bearings as we examine the various theories.

### III. Criteria for Evaluating Theories of the Atonement

As I see it, a theory of the Atonement must be evaluated on the basis of three main criteria.

1. It must be consistent with Scripture and it should provide a theoretical framework that plausibly ties all or most of the relevant texts into a coherent whole.
2. It should have a high degree of explanatory power, that is, it should explain in clarifying detail how Christ’s life, death, and resurrection reconcile us to God.
3. It must make sense from the moral point of view. (In what follows, it will become apparent that theories of the Atonement inevitably make or presuppose important moral claims, e.g., claims about divine love and justice. And sometimes these moral claims are very questionable.)

Since I am a philosopher who reads the Bible but not a Bible scholar, my main focus will be on criteria (2) and (3). But criterion (1) is obviously crucial, so I must make a few brief remarks about it.

### IV. Relevant Scripture Passages

We can classify most of the relevant Bible passages under three headings:<sup>7</sup>

*General.* Many passages in the New Testament state the doctrine of the Atonement in a general way, e.g., “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, . . .; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Corinthians 5:17-19). Or “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

*Life, Death, and Resurrection.* While “Christ died for our sins” is a common expression of the doctrine of the Atonement, some Scripture passages indicate that Christ’s life and resurrection are part of his work in putting us right with God. For example, “If while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life” (Romans 5:10). And Paul says that Jesus “was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (Romans 4:25). And “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17). Given such passages as these, it is odd that Christ’s resurrection plays only a minor role in some of the most influential theories of the Atonement—more on this momentarily.

*Sacrifice and Ransom Analogies.* The Scriptures provide striking analogies regarding the Atonement. Perhaps the dominant analogy for the atonement employed in the New Testament is the analogy of sacrifice, taken from the Old Testament practice of animal sacrifice. Jesus himself apparently employs this analogy at the Last Supper, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. . .” (Mark 14:24). The book of Hebrews makes extensive use of the sacrifice analogy, e.g., “He entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:12).

The ransom analogy also appears frequently in the New Testament: “Just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

See also Mark 10:45, 1 Timothy 2:5-6, and 1 Peter 1:18-19. In ancient times, prisoners of war often became slaves and a ransom had to be paid to free them. Note that the sacrifice and ransom analogies have a common core: both involve *offering something of great value to maintain an important relationship*.<sup>8</sup>

Does a punishment analogy appear in the Bible? This is not an issue I can discuss in great detail, but let me make three brief comments about it. First, some people assume that when animals were sacrificed under Old Testament law, the animals were *punished* for the sins of human beings, but this is not stated in Scripture. In fact, although the Old Testament says a lot about how to perform animal sacrifices, it doesn't say much about how they work. One suggestion, taking a cue from Leviticus 17:11 ("The life . . . is in the blood"), is that the blood of the animal signifies the worshipper's life; thus, by offering the sacrifice one dedicates one's life to God.<sup>9</sup>

Second, many people think that the New Testament says (or implies) that Christ was punished for our sins. As far as I can tell, the textual evidence for this claim is very weak. Let's look at one passage which many have understood to imply that Christ was punished:

Romans 8: 3. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.

Regarding this passage, N. T. Wright remarks, "This is the closest Paul comes to saying . . . what so many of his interpreters have attributed to him: that the death of Jesus was the ultimate moment of judicial condemnation, of God's punishment . . ." <sup>10</sup> But, manifestly, the verse says, not that Christ was condemned, but that sin was condemned. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, God condemned sin (i.e., declared it wrong and reprehensible). It simply doesn't follow that God punished Christ.

Third, the notion of punishment or chastisement does appear in Isaiah 53: 5-6:

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with 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. (Revised Standard Version)

To chastise is indeed to discipline or punish. But at least two points need to be kept in mind here. (1) The Isaiah passage may be simply employing a figure of speech. (2) Punishment can be administered for different purposes. For example, it can be administered for the purpose of correction or reform, the goal being to teach a lesson or improve character. Punishment can also be applied for the purpose of retribution, simply because it is deserved. So, Isaiah 53 speaks of chastisement, but for what purpose? My point is simply that the text seems to be open to multiple interpretations. And I think it is fair to say that this text is not a clear endorsement of any particular theory of the Atonement.

## V. Historically Influential Theories

Let me now summarize some standard objections to several historically influential theories: the Ransom Theory, Abelard's Moral Influence Theory, and the Punishment Theory. (I'm setting Anselm's view aside temporarily because Richard Swinburne's recent work on the Atonement is in the spirit of Anselm's, and I'll examine Swinburne's theory in the next section.) Because our time is limited, I cannot provide a thorough evaluation of these views. My goal is merely to state one or two key reasons why many Christian thinkers continue to seek more adequate theories.

### A. The Ransom Theory

Let's start with the Ransom Theory. In Origen's version, it runs as follows: Through sin, we humans have put ourselves in bondage to the Devil. To free us from this bondage, God had to pay a ransom to the Devil. The ransom God offered was Christ's death—the death of one who, as sinless, did not deserve to die. The Devil jumped at the opportunity of extending the reign of death to a perfect human. Thus, the Devil was given his due, and we humans were freed from captivity. Unfortunately for the Devil, however, he did not realize that Christ could escape the bonds of death, so through Christ's resurrection, the Devil lost the ransom.

The main difficulty with this theory was noted by Anselm: it assumes that the Devil has a right to demand a ransom and thus that God is required to enter into a transaction with the Devil. God actually owes something to the Devil? Isn't the Devil, who is constantly working against what is right and good, more like a kidnapper who demands payment but doesn't have a right to it? Furthermore, surely God cannot rightly be said to owe it to the Devil to *let the Devil kill God's Son, Jesus Christ*. Thus, the moral assumptions of this version of the Ransom Theory are generally regarded as its chief weakness.<sup>11</sup>

### B. The Moral Influence Theory

Abelard's Moral Influence Theory says that Christ's life and death inspire us to exemplify his love for God and neighbor—that is their entire purpose. Of course, Christian theologians had always emphasized the importance of Christ as an example. The novelty in Abelard's approach was his claim that Christ's atoning work consisted *entirely* in providing an inspirational moral example.

Abelard's view raises a number of questions; here I will mention just two. First, suppose we are inspired by Christ's life and teaching and thereby morally improved. Why should we suppose that such moral improvement reconciles us to God? What about our past sins? And what about the fact that even if we improve morally, we will still be far from perfect? No doubt God approves of any moral progress we make, but God still disapproves of our sins, past and present. So, Abelard's view doesn't really seem to clarify how we sinners can be reconciled to God.

Second, earlier I drew attention to biblical texts indicating that Christ's resurrection from the dead is an important part of God's work of reconciliation. But what role does the resurrection of Christ play in Abelard's theory? Even if we grant that Christ's life and death inspire us to love God and neighbor, the resurrection plays no essential role in the Moral Influence Theory. At most it serves to signal God's approval of Christ as an example. But whatever theory of the atonement is offered, one could always say that Christ's resurrection signaled God's approval what Christ accomplished through his life and death. And it seems to me that Christ's resurrection must surely play a more important role than that of merely signaling God's approval of what Christ accomplished through his life and death. The resurrection must itself play a central role in Christ's work of atonement.

### C. The Punishment Theory

Many of the Protestant Reformers adopted the Punishment Theory. According to the Punishment theory, divine justice requires that wrongdoers be punished. And we humans are sinners--wrongdoers. But through his death on the cross, Christ took the punishment that we deserve.



Advocates of the Punishment Theory see it as upholding a biblical view of God's justice and of the seriousness of sin. An additional apparent strength of the view is that it gives a direct answer to the question, "Why did Christ have to die a horrible death?" Christ had to die a horrible death because, in order for divine justice to be satisfied, some person (or persons) had to receive the punishment merited by human wrongdoing; and apart from Christ's suffering, each of us would have had to bear the punishment for his or her own sins.

Nevertheless, the Punishment Theory faces many problems; let me here just mention three. First, how can justice be satisfied by punishing an innocent person? Suppose Joe is found guilty of murder and he receives the sentence of death, but Joe's brother or mother volunteers to die in his place. If Joe's brother or mother is put to death, would this satisfy the demands of justice? It seems to me that it clearly would not. In fact, putting Joe's brother or mother to death in his place would be a terrible miscarriage of justice.

Sometimes people try to defend the Punishment Theory with financial examples. If Sue has stolen \$1000 and lost it all at the casino, she can't pay it back. But a friend might give her the money so she can pay it back. Yes, where money is concerned, this kind of assistance is possible. But first, such assistance is not punishment. And second, suppose that, instead of offering the money, Sue's friend offers to be imprisoned in her place. Will justice be served if Sue's innocent friend is imprisoned? Surely not.<sup>12</sup>

Here's a second problem with the Punishment Theory. Under what conditions does an action properly count as punishment? On a fairly standard account of criminal punishment, the conditions include:

1. harsh treatment (e.g., fines, imprisonment, whipping, death)
2. imposed by a legitimate authority
3. for a violation of rules authorized by that authority

4. of an offender (or supposed offender) for an offense
5. the harsh treatment expresses condemnation of the offender for the offense.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, according to most philosophers of law, when a state imprisons someone who is *known* not to be an offender, e.g., when a person is imprisoned merely for his or her political opinions, the state itself is doing wrong, and the imprisonment is an abuse of power that cannot properly be classified as *punishment*. And of course Jesus didn't violate any of God's rules and God knew that Jesus was not an offender. So, conditions 4 and 5 do not apply in the case of Christ's crucifixion. *Note that God would ultimately be the punisher, even if human intermediaries are involved, because it is God's justice that must be satisfied, according to the Punishment Theory.* But with conditions 4 and 5 for criminal punishment unsatisfied, Christ's crucifixion can hardly be properly classified as a case of punishment.

Third, the resurrection of Christ plays a relatively minor role in the Punishment Theory. Justice was served through the punishment Christ received—the scourging and crucifixion. Christ's resurrection is obviously not part of his punishment. Yet, as we've seen, the Scriptures teach that Christ was *raised for our justification* (Romans 4: 25). At most Christ's resurrection would serve to show God's approval of what Christ accomplished through his suffering and death. But again, it seems to me that Christ's resurrection must play a more central role than this in the work of atonement.

## VI. A Leading Contemporary Theory

The well-known British philosopher of religion, Richard Swinburne, has developed a theory of the atonement which I'll call "the Reparation Theory."<sup>14</sup> According to Swinburne, when you wrong someone, you should atone, that is, you should repent, apologize, make reparation, and (in the case of serious wrongdoing) offer penance. For example, if Dave has stolen Mei's car, he

should repent (be genuinely sorry for what he has done), apologize to Mei, and make reparation, i.e., return the car *and* compensate Mei for any damage done to the car and for the inconvenience to Mei resulting from the theft. In addition, Swinburne claims that penance is required in the case of serious wrongdoing. Penance goes beyond apology and reparation; it involves some gift or act that signals the wrongdoer's sorrow for what he has done.

It is important to notice that sometimes we need help in order to atone for our wrongdoings. Go back to the example of Sue, who stole \$1000 and lost it all gambling. A friend of Sue's might loan or give her the money, so she can make reparation.

With these preliminaries, let's return to the case of God and humankind. We humans have seriously wronged God both directly (by failing to worship God as we ought) and indirectly (by mistreating God's creatures). Furthermore, we have no way to make reparation. Even if we were to live perfectly from now on, our sinful past would remain what it is. Christ, however, did live a perfect life. Swinburne adds:

It is up to the wronged person to deem when a sufficient reparation has been made; and one truly perfect life would surely be a proper amount of reparation for God to deem that reparation . . . enough had been made.<sup>15</sup>

Out of divine generosity, then, God (through Christ) supplies the reparation and penance for our wrongdoings. It remains for us to accept God's provision and to plead it as reparation and penance.

One strength of Swinburne's theory is that it is grounded in his reflections on atonement as it occurs in our daily lives. But I believe the view faces a number of difficulties; here I will mention just three. (1) If what's required of a human being is a life well-lived by him (or her), then does it make sense for God to accept someone else's life as reparation? According to

Swinburne, God, as the wronged party, has latitude in specifying the acceptable reparation. But consider an analogy: If you owe your teacher a term paper, and you do a really bad job on it, can you compensate by turning in another student's paper (with the consent of both the student and the teacher)? If the requirement was for *you* to write a good paper, this "resolution" of the problem is most unsatisfying. Similarly, if God requires that *each of us* live our lives well, how can the fact that someone else has lived well make amends for my failure to do so? And surely God, our Creator, does require that each of us live his or her life well.

(2) Given that Christ is divine, Christ is the offended party. So, does it really make sense for Christ to provide reparation to himself? That would be like apologizing to oneself, wouldn't it? Or like the teacher accepting one of her own papers in place of yours. If a person "pays reparation" to herself, atonement has not been achieved.

(3) Given that a perfect life is what's needed, how do the crucifixion and resurrection come into the picture? A good life might end in a terrible death, but it doesn't have to, surely.<sup>16</sup> So, Christ's *painful* death is apparently dispensable on the Reparation Theory. And what role does Christ's resurrection play in the work of atonement? Only the role of signaling to humans that God accepts Christ's work as sufficient reparation and penance.<sup>17</sup> So, the resurrection isn't part of the reparation and penance, it merely signals that the reparation and penance have been accepted by God. But does that give Christ's resurrection a sufficiently central role in the work of atonement? To me, that seems doubtful.

## VII. The Relational Theory

In this section I propose a theory of my own. To do this, I need to be more explicit about the factors which alienate us from God. Accordingly, I offer the following list. Some of the items

on the list may be important factors for some people but not for others. Other items, such as the first two, apply in all cases:

1. Our past sins
2. Our present sins and sinful desires
3. Our fear that good will not triumph over evil
4. Our resentment at the suffering and danger we must endure in this earthly life
5. Our fear (or feeling) that human existence is meaningless or insignificant
6. Our fear (or feeling) that God is indifferent to us
7. Our fear (or feeling) that God is “out to get us”
8. Our fear (or feeling) that God is unwilling to help us
9. Our despair over ourselves; hopelessness regarding our persisting spiritual failures.
10. Our dread of death and divine judgment

I shall refer to these items, taken collectively, as the Sin Barrier. And I now wish to advance three main claims about the Sin Barrier.

A. The various elements of the Sin Barrier separate us from God.

B. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ have a clear bearing on the elements of the Sin Barrier. I especially want to emphasize that the *grounds* for the fears and feelings (items 3-10) are removed by Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. Through Christ, God has taken decisive action to break down the Sin Barrier.

C. Divine verbal communication (spoken or written) is not the best means of removing the elements of the Sin Barrier. Specific actions are needed.

Let me take these up in order.

*A. The Elements of the Sin Barrier.* The “Sin Barrier” consists of diverse factors that *separate us from God*. I am not claiming or implying that we are always at fault for having the fears and feelings I’ve listed here. Nevertheless, these fears and feelings form a barrier between God and us; they can prevent us from trusting God fully or from trusting God at all. They may even cause us to resent or to hate God.

Also, in my view, the statement, “Christ died for our sins” is too often understood rather narrowly, as the claim that Christ died for our individual misdeeds and sinful attitudes. Of course, our individual sins are a very important part of the Sin Barrier. But some elements of the Sin Barrier are part of what might be called the culture of sin, attitudes that are transmitted to us as culture in general is transmitted. These elements are “contagious,” transmitted in subtle ways like racism and sexism.

From the standpoint of Christian theology, our attitude toward God should be one of profound trust. After all, if God is both almighty and perfectly morally good, God is surely worthy of our trust. But the fears and feelings belonging to the Sin Barrier (items 3-10) involve a lack of trust in God. For example, consider item 3. If we trust God, surely we will be confident that good will triumph over evil in the long run. Or consider items 6-8. If we trust God, then we will not think that God is indifferent to us, out to get us, or unwilling to help us.

*B. Christ and the Sin Barrier.* How are the life, death, and resurrection of Christ relevant to the elements of the Sin Barrier? Let's start with items 3-10.

1. Christ's life, the life of God-incarnate, assures us that God is opposed to evil. And Christ's resurrection assures us that God is willing and able to overcome even death; we are thus assured of the ultimate triumph of good over evil (item 3).

2. If actions speak louder than words, the life and death of Jesus, God-incarnate, deliver an especially powerful message: *There must be a good reason why we humans suffer as we do in this earthly life, for a divine person became human and shared in such suffering.* A divine person surely would not share in our sufferings *if there were no good reason for them.* Thus, the grounds for item 4 (Our resentment at the suffering and danger we must endure in this earthly life) are removed.

3. Similarly, given that a divine person has become a human being and lived a life here on earth— a life in no way shielded from frustrations and hardship— human existence must surely be meaningful. A divine being would not consent to a form of existence that was meaningless or insignificant. And Christ's life reveals that meaning and significance are to be found in loving relationships, i.e., though loving God and neighbor. Thus, Christ's life removes the grounds for item 5 (our fear that human life is meaningless or insignificant).

4. As we contemplate the sin and suffering in the world (including our own sins), we are prone to fear that God is indifferent or hostile, and will not help us (items 6-9). And we may fear that God will not forgive our sins. But if Jesus was indeed God-incarnate, then clearly God is not indifferent or hostile to us. At great cost, God had extended to us an offer of love.

5. In regard to item 10 (the dread of death and divine judgment), two points are especially relevant. First, Christ's resurrection assures us that death will not have the last word; we too shall

be raised. Second, Christ, being divine as well as human, provides us with a vivid picture or image of divine love. We shall not be judged by an almighty tyrant or cosmic prison warden obsessed with retribution, but by a God of love; a God whose love is like the love made manifest in Christ.

Now, what about items 1 and 2, our sins (past and present) and sinful desires? I am now thinking particularly of acts for which we are at fault and desires we are at least partly responsible for, e.g., desires we've habitually acted on or at least given safe harbor, such as a desire for revenge. Here it seems to me that Christ's life needs to be emphasized. In what did Christ's life consist? In large measure, Christ was a teacher and a healer. And a central element of his teaching concerned forgiveness. Parables such as the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) and the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21-35) underscore that divine love stands ready to forgive. Forgiveness is not a problem for God! But Christ not only taught that God stands ready to forgive; *Christ, as God-incarnate, demonstrated divine forgiveness.* A paralyzed man is lowered through an opening in the roof and prior to healing him Jesus' says, "My son, your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5). And to a Pharisee who refers to a woman as a *sinner*, Jesus says, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven" (Luke 7:47); to the woman he simply says, "Your sins are forgiven" (Luke 7:48). Thus, both through his teaching and through his specific acts of forgiveness as God-incarnate, we are assured that God stands ready to forgive us for our sinful acts and desires. And if Christ is willing even to be crucified to overcome the Sin Barrier, we cannot doubt that his offer of forgiveness is genuine.

*C. Words and the Sin Barrier.* So far I have emphasized how certain fears and feelings form a barrier to fellowship between humans and God, and how Christ's life, death, and



resurrection *remove the grounds* for those fears and feelings. Someone might object, “But God could remove those grounds just by telling us that he loves us.” I do not think this is true.

Consider the following illustration. Some young children are playing in a sandbox. An adult— let’s say an uncle of one of the children— stands outside the sandbox, dressed in a business suit. He tries to engage the children with words, saying nice things, praising their creations in the sand. He is largely ignored. A second adult— let’s say an aunt of one of the children— arrives, dressed in old clothes. She climbs into the sandbox and shares in the play— not taking over but just having fun with the kids. Soon the children are laughing and talking with her. The point is that, where personal relationships are concerned, there can be a big difference between just talking and fully entering into a situation.

If Jesus was God-incarnate, then a member of the Trinity has fully entered into our human situation. Jesus might have lived a privileged life as a wealthy aristocrat, largely shielded from the harsh realities of human existence. But instead he was a peasant living in a country under Roman occupation. He struggled against powerful forces of indifference and injustice. For this, he was brutally tortured and crucified. Had Jesus lived a life of wealth and privilege, his life and death would have had little effect on key elements of the Sin Barrier. A life largely shielded from suffering could hardly show us that this earthly life is worth living even when it has its share of suffering or comes to a horrifying end. And a life of privilege, free of the struggle with indifference and injustice, could hardly assure us that God will ultimately triumph over evil.

And as we’ve already seen, the resurrection has a crucial bearing on certain elements of the Sin Barrier. The resurrection shows the tremendous power God has in overcoming evil; God can overcome even death. Moreover, Christ’s resurrection assures us that this earthly life is only a

phase of our existence; there is more to come. Earthly lives marked with tragedy will be redeemed in a future life.

I am not arguing that Christ's life, death, and resurrection are the only *logically possible* means to reconciliation with God. There is no need to make so strong a claim. What I am arguing is that God-incarnate's life, death, and resurrection are fitting and effective ways to "break down" the Sin Barrier. Indeed, I find it hard to imagine a more fitting and effective way.

### VIII. Questions

Naturally, the Relational Theory raises questions. Let me respond briefly to three questions and then invite your questions and comments.

*Question 1: Hebrews 9:22 says, "And without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." In context, doesn't this verse imply that Jesus had to be killed in order for God to forgive us? But the Relational Theory fails to explain this.* Reply: Here I believe we are misled by the English translation. The Greek word translated "forgiveness," namely, *aphesis*, has connotations lacking in English terms such as "pardon" and "forgiveness." For example, the Greek word can mean "release from captivity."<sup>18</sup> The point is not that almighty God cannot forgive (or pardon) us unless Jesus is killed! God stands ready to forgive (Ezekiel 18: 21-23), but mere forgiveness is not the issue. Our captivity to sin and evil is the larger issue. And, as I've tried to explain, we are confined by or trapped behind a formidable Sin Barrier. In order for God-incarnate to overcome the Sin Barrier, in all its elements, he must employ a fitting and effective means. Entering fully into the human situation would seem to be such a means. Furthermore, it's hard to see how the Sin Barrier, in all its elements, could be effectively dealt with by a life that avoided suffering and death

of the sort that have so often led humans to fear (a) that evil is stronger than good, (b) that life is not worthwhile, and (c) that God is indifferent (or hostile) to us.

*Question 2. Does the Relational Theory accord well with the main Scriptural analogies of sacrifice and ransom?* Reply: As we have just seen, the main point of the sacrifice analogy is simply that Christ's life, death, and resurrection constitute something of great value given to save us. And interestingly, the ransom analogy contains a very similar idea: Something of great value is given to free the captives. Both analogies emphasize that sin can be dealt with only at a high cost; something of great value must be offered in order to overcome sin. Thus, the Relational Theory fits in well with the two main biblical analogies for the atonement— something of great value (namely, Christ's life, death, and resurrection) must be given to overcome the Sin Barrier.

*Question 3. Many do not believe in God and Christ. And this is often through no fault of their own because the evidence is not very good. An almighty God could certainly provide everyone with much better evidence if he wanted to. So, is God really concerned about removing the grounds for the fears and feelings comprising the Sin Barrier? That seems doubtful.*

Reply: If this is a good objection to the Relational Theory, I think something quite similar is a good objection to theism. The so-called "hiddenness of God" objection has been much discussed in recent years; it can be summed up as follows: "Many people do not believe that God exists and this is through no fault of their own. But such a situation would not obtain if a God of love existed, for a God of love would want a relationship with each person and hence would make his existence clear to everyone— except perhaps to those (if any) who do not want to know about God. So, a God of love does not exist."<sup>19</sup> And if a God of love does not exist, I admit that all my reflections on the atonement have been pointless.

Here I can only sketch one possible response to the problem of divine hiddenness. It seems to me that it can be rational for a person to believe that God exists but it can also be rational for a person not to believe that God exists. The evidence is subject to multiple, reasonable interpretations, as is common in matters of controversy. Similarly, I think it can be rational for a person to believe the central claims the church makes about Christ, but also rational for a person not to believe those claims. If there is a God of love, why do we find ourselves in this situation?

Let's suppose God makes God's existence (and the church's central claims about Christ) clear to everyone. The evidence would not need to be spectacular, but it would need to be very strong—strong enough to settle the matter *decisively*. In this circumstance, it would be irrational to be an agnostic or an atheist, and irrational to deny the church's central claims about Christ. For short, let's say that religious nonbelief would be irrational. So, in this circumstance, religious nonbelief would presumably be rare; only unreasonable people would be religious nonbelievers. And yet, I think we can be pretty sure that many people would not want to live religious lives, i.e., lives characterized by devotion to God and Christ. We can be pretty sure about this, in my view, for at least two reasons. (1) Religious believers often find it hard to trust God and to follow Christ's teachings. Taken seriously, the religious way is not easy. Many Christians are merely nominal ones. (2) Humans in general find self-seeking or pleasure-seeking forms of life very attractive. Many people who are brought up in a religious way abandon a religious way of life, at least for a time, because these alternatives are so attractive. (By a self-seeking or pleasure-seeking life, I'm not talking about what would conventionally be regarded as an immoral or unethical life, but simply one in which self or pleasure is given a higher priority than doing God's will.) There is in each of us a strong desire to run our own lives, to be in charge of them, and there is a strong

resistance to being told what to do. And yet the religious life fundamentally involves giving priority to doing God's will.

So, if God were to make God's existence (and key claims about Christ) clear to everyone, the likely result would be this: Many people would have religious beliefs but would not want to live in accord with those beliefs (and would not do so). They would thus find themselves living in a deeply irrational way, at odds with their religious beliefs. Now, of course, human beings are capable of such irrationality. But if there is a God of love, such a God would not want to operate in a manipulative way. A loving God would not want a role analogous to that of an unwelcome chaperon, constantly serving as a kill-joy and irritant to non-religious people. From this standpoint, an evidential situation subject to multiple, reasonable interpretations, has obvious advantages. One can reject a religious way of life without falling into irrationality. God's presence can reasonably be doubted or denied, as can the work of Christ.<sup>20</sup>

(At this point, some may reply that God is not loving if God places us in a religiously ambiguous environment for the result will be that many people go to hell for winding up with the wrong beliefs *through no fault of their own*. But this reply assumes that God damns people for arriving at false beliefs through no fault of their own, an assumption I am not willing to make.)

The gospels provide us with an account of what Jesus taught and what he did. Given that account, the fears and feelings comprising the Sin Barrier are in fact groundless. This has been my main point. Of course, to benefit from Christ's work, one must believe that Christ lived, died, and was resurrected. "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (John 6: 29). I fully admit that the gospel accounts can be doubted— if there can be reasonable doubt about God's existence, then there can be reasonable doubt about much in the gospel narratives. But I submit that the gospel accounts can also be rationally accepted as true accounts. In other words,

God has put us in a position where rational acceptance of the gospel accounts is possible. So we are in a position to benefit from Christ's work by believing the gospel accounts— and of course a great many people do just that. God has made it possible for us to understand that the fears and feelings comprising the Sin Barrier are groundless.

In conclusion, I have summarized standard objections to a series of influential theories of the Atonement. And I have proposed a theory in which Christ's life, death, and resurrection are seen as removing the grounds for the fears and feelings that comprise the Sin Barrier. Humans are separated from God, not only by their personal misdeeds, but by a complex of negative fears and feelings. But given Christ's life, death, and resurrection, these fears and feelings are groundless. Christ has triumphed over the Sin Barrier. <sup>21</sup>

## Endnotes

1. My claims regarding the history of Christian thought about the atonement are primarily gleaned from three sources: Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969), first published in English in 1931; L. W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1920); and J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, revised edition (NY: HarperCollins, 1978), 375-400.
2. Grensted, *op. cit.*, 33.
3. Anselm of Canterbury, "Why God Became Man," in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, eds., Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 260-356.
4. Grensted, *op. cit.*, 191.
5. Abelard sets forth his theory in his commentary on Romans. See Peter Abelard, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Steven R. Cartwright, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 168ff.
6. Aulén, *op. cit.*, 2. I'm not sure that this definition is quite apt because I think that many theologians who reject Abelard's Moral Influence theory--the standard example of the Subjective type of theory—would deny that Christ's atoning work "changed God's attitude." After all, "God proves his love for us in that *while we still were sinners* Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8, italics added).
7. Unless otherwise specified, all Scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. My discussion of the biblical materials owes a debt to Gordon D. Fee, "Paul and Some Metaphors for Salvation: Some Reflections on Pauline Soteriology" and N. T. Wright, "Redemption from the New Perspective? Towards are Multi-Layered Pauline Theology of the Cross," in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, SJ, and Gerald O'Collins, SJ, eds., *The Redemption: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on Christ the Redeemer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 43-67 and 69-100.
8. I have referred to the sacrifice and ransom *analogies*; why not take these terms as literally descriptive of Christ's work? I will discuss the problems of understanding "ransom" literally below. The main problem with taking the term "sacrifice" literally is simply that it doesn't explain how Christ's death puts us right with God. According to the book of Hebrews, animal sacrifice doesn't actually remove sin (Hebrews 10:4), so we aren't explaining anything if we say simply that Christ death works like an animal sacrifice. If we are thinking that animals, when

sacrificed, are punished, then we must consider the problems of the Punishment Theory of the atonement (see section V). If we are thinking that when God gets angry, he must vent his anger through some act of violence, we are surely presupposing a morally flawed Deity.

9. J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 59.
10. N. T. Wright., *op. cit.*, 89.
11. Augustine's version of the Ransom Theory avoids the assumption that the Devil has a right to a ransom. But Augustine holds that it wouldn't be right for God to simply use force to deliver us from Satan's dominion. So, Christ was offered to Satan, but by taking Christ's life, Satan overreached, abused his power, and made it just and right for God to penalize Satan by limiting Satan's power over us. Augustine's version also raises questions. First, isn't abusing his power routine for Satan? Doesn't Satan constantly use his power to create misery and oppression? Why is it just this one case that gives God the right to interfere and take action? Second, the process of the atonement seems to consist of finding a pretext for God to interfere with Satan: Christ is offered to Satan in the knowledge that Satan will go too far, thus legitimating divine interference. But can we believe that God has to resort to such scheming in order to save us? Third, in what way, exactly, did God limit Satan's dominion? What changed? Satan and his cohorts are still active. People still sin; they still die. Bad things still happen to good people. Incidentally, Augustine's reflections on the atonement were not limited to the Ransom Theory. Christ's atoning work involves multiple roles, including the role of taking the punishment we deserve. See J. N. D. Kelly, *op. cit.*, 393.
12. John Hare has tried to defend the punishment theory by appealing to the idea of a partial merger of identity. Here's an example—key elements are borrowed from Hare. Suppose a high school student—I'll call him "Mike," has gotten into trouble. He's been stealing from other students' lockers. When Mike's parents are informed, they feel terribly ashamed. They phone the principal and apologize profusely for what their son has done. They offer to pay whatever it takes to replace the stolen items. In short, they act almost as if they were the guilty ones. Now, the idea of a partial merger of identity is interesting and I think it can help us to avoid an overly individualistic approach to ethics. But it seems to me that it cannot be stretched far enough to defend the Punishment Theory. Go back to Joe, who was found guilty of murder. Let's suppose Joe comes from a good family; his parents and siblings feel terribly ashamed of what has happened. They would do anything in their power to try to make things right. But putting Joe's brother or mother to death in his place—even with their consent, clearly does not satisfy



- the demands of justice; or so it seems to me. See John Hare, *Why Bother Being Good? The Place of God in the Moral Life* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 54-73.
13. In the main, this characterization of punishment is borrowed from H. L. A. Hart, "Prologomenon to the Principles of Punishment" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 60 (1959-60), 1-26. The last clause, however, is drawn from Joel Feinberg, "The Expressive Function of Punishment," in *Doing and Deserving* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 95-118.
  14. Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1989), esp. 148-162. See also Richard Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 53-60.
  15. Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?* *op. cit.*, 57.
  16. This point is borrowed from Stephen Porter, "Swinburnean Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution," *Faith and Philosophy*, v. 21, n. 2 (April, 2004), 232-33.
  17. Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*, *op. cit.*, 160.
  18. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, fourth revised and augmented edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 124.
  19. For a short but insightful discussion of the problem of divine hiddenness, see Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Hiddenness of God," (ed.) Donald Borchert, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: MacMillan, 2006), 1-8.
  20. Why couldn't God give each person who wants a relationship with him decisive evidence for the relevant theological truths while withholding such evidence from those who do not want a relationship with him? (1) As long as large numbers of people do not believe the relevant truths, it seems to me that there will be grounds for religious doubt. With so many not sharing my beliefs, wouldn't I have to wonder whether my evidence is really all that good? And if all those who want a relationship with God confidently believe the relevant truths while those who don't want a relationship with God remain in unbelief, wouldn't there be a legitimate concern that religious belief is the product of desire—of what believers want to be true (and hence that religious belief is wishful thinking)? (2) There may also be a problem in supposing that God knows how a person will respond if more evidence is provided. After all, what God wants is not merely our intellectual assent to the relevant theological truths, but our trust, worship, and obedience. And many of us may sometimes (or partly) want a relationship with God but sometimes (or partly) *not* want such a relationship. Our motivations are apt to be mixed and subtle and they may vary from time to time. God may know how we will react to him (if stronger evidence

is provided) only if God has “middle knowledge”—*knowledge of what persons would freely do in every possible circumstance*. (If convinced of the relevant theological truths, will I trust God, worship God, and serve God? Or will I find that I would rather run my own life, focus on my own goals, and perhaps resent divine “interference”?) The problem here is that many Christian theologians and philosophers doubt that God has such middle knowledge.

21. I wish to thank a number of friends and colleagues who have provided me with helpful comments on drafts of this lecture and/or on my theory of the atonement: Terence Cuneo, Owen Ewald, Sam Fullhart, Kenneth Himma, Doug Koskela, Gene Lemcio, Patrick McDonald, Rebekah Rice, Leland Saunders, and Rick Steele.

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