



Prolegomenon to Theories of the Atonement | BY NORMAN H. YOUNG

It is well known that ten eyewitnesses will give ten variant versions of the same event. It is equally true that if one were to ask ten experts—whether they be economists, educators, or theologians—what they considered was the central truth of their discipline, one would again receive ten disparate answers. Explanations of the meaning of the cross are just as diverse. The dividing point is immediate depending on whether one sees Jesus' death as primarily directed toward God, humanity, or the devil. From then on the divisions within these three broad categories multiply without end. The distinctions are often very subtle, and one needs patience and discipline to sort them out.¹

This article has a more modest intention. It simply wishes to emphasize the biblical data with which any interpretation of the significance of the cross must engage. For a theory to deserve our serious attention, it must endeavor to include all aspects of the various images that the New Testament uses to proclaim the cross. However, the biblical data are considerable and variegated, and to embrace them all in one metaphor is impossible. What follows outlines the biblical expressions that any interpretation of the cross must attempt to incorporate.

First and foremost, the death of Christ as a saving event is the initiative of God and is not dependent on human activity.² Of course “wicked hands” nailed him to the cross (Acts 2:23), but “God *sent* his only Son into the world” (1 John 4:9) to save the world (John 3:17). God “*gave* his only Son” (John 3:16), and Jesus also came “to *give* his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).³ God “did not *spare* His own Son, but *delivered* Him up for us all” (Rom. 8:32 NKJV). God “*put forward* [Christ Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement” (Rom. 3:25). God “*reconciled* us to himself through Christ” (2 Cor. 5:18). It takes humility and courage in any disagreement for either of the parties involved to take the first step towards reconciliation. God was clearly the wronged party in the dispute with humanity; yet he took the first step towards resolving it and thus followed his own counsel (see Mark 11:25).

Second, and intimately related to the first, the cross issues from God's love for humanity. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16). “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). “And the life I now live in the flesh I live

by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Eph. 5:2). God "loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). It is important to note that these texts tell us that God's (or the Son's) love preceded the cross-event and was not procured by it.

Third, God's redemptive act in Christ is centered in the cross. All the great redemptive words in the New Testament are attached to the cross, not to the incarnation, and not even to the resurrection as such. We were "justified by his blood" (Rom. 5:9). "We were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:10). We "were bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23; 2 Pet. 2:1). Christ "has nullified the law of commandments with its decrees . . . so that he might reconcile both groups [Jew and Gentile] to God in one body through the cross" (Eph. 2:16).⁴ "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things . . . by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20). "Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time" (Heb. 9:28). We were set apart (sanctified) "by his own blood" (Heb. 13:12). We "were ransomed . . . with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:18). "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross" (1 Pet. 2:24). "He freed us from our sins by his blood" (Rev. 1:5).

Every redemptive metaphor used in the New Testament, from forgiveness (Matt. 26:28; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:22) to salvation (1 Cor. 1:18), is attached to the cross. It is beyond dispute that the cross is the saving event in the apostolic writings.

Fourth, the death of Christ is universal in its scope. Many make the mistake here of thinking that if the atonement is completed on the cross, then either all of humanity or the elect alone must be destined for God's coming kingdom. The alternative is then seen to be between Calvinism's limited atonement for the predestined elect and Universalism's ultimate salvation of everyone. This is to ignore the fact

that even in human experience forgiveness has the objective of restoring a relationship or at least of ending hostility. We cannot isolate God's forgiveness from fellowship with him. We are lost not because we are not forgiven, but because we refuse the fellowship and the walk with God that forgiveness opens up to us.

A number of texts affirm the universal scope of the cross: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). "We know that this is truly the Savior of the world" (John 4:17; 1 John 4:14). "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). "Therefore, just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all" (Rom 5:18). "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5:19). "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

The purpose of sin is to disrupt, to divorce, and to divide from God (and from each other), but the purpose of the atonement is to restore, to reconcile, and to reunite us with God (and with each other). We can neither create nor destroy God's forgiving mercy, but we can certainly frustrate its purpose by declining the "life [that] is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3).

Fifth, there is finality and a non-repeatable aspect to the atoning death of Christ on the cross. This is what the Puritans referred to as the "finished work of Christ." "For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed" (1 Cor. 5:7). God "forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:13–14). "When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3). "But when Christ had offered for all time a single

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sacrifice for sins, ‘he sat down at the right hand of God’ (Heb. 10:11); ‘for by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified’ (Heb. 10:14). Christ has ‘abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel’ (2 Tim. 1:10). The finished work of Christ is a reality in him, but only in him. To share in the benefit of his finished work one must be in Christ through an active and living faith.

Sixth, the cross confronts and resolves the problem of human sin. ‘For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’ (Matt. 26:28). ‘Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood’ (Rom. 3:23–25). ‘Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures’ (1 Cor. 15:3). ‘Who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age’ (Gal. 1:4). ‘So that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people’ (Heb. 2:17). ‘He has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself’ (Heb. 9:26).

The cross destroys sin’s disruptive power

and its ability to separate us from God. But notice that God’s forgiveness or reconciliation precedes our repentance (Rom. 2:4). Repentance is how we accept God’s forgiveness and enter into fellowship with him through what he has already done for us in Christ, that is, removed or taken away our sin (John 1:29). Whenever a debt is forgiven, the one remitting the debt bears the cost. God’s remission of human sin meant that he absorbed the cost himself. The cross then is more the consequence or expression of God’s forgiveness rather than its cause or prerequisite.⁵

Seventh, Christ through the cross acted in some inexpressible way for our sakes or even in our stead. Many see this as ‘the sweetest exchange,’ though others see it more as an ‘interchange.’⁶ ‘Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’” (Gal. 3:13). ‘For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Cor. 5:21).⁷ ‘For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich’ (2 Cor. 8:9). ‘For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God’ (1 Pet. 3:18).

The exchange is certainly sweet. He was cursed that we might be blessed. He was made sin that we might be declared righteous.⁸ He became poor that we might become rich (that is, rich in grace, rich in mercy, and rich in kindness as he is). Notice, however, that Paul did not say God cursed Jesus, despite the Old Testament text that he quotes in part saying, ‘anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse’ (Deut 21:23). Nowhere does the New Testament say that God’s wrath was upon Jesus.⁹ We must be careful that we do not make this seventh point contradict the second one.¹⁰

Eighth, the exchange incorporates the believer into the experience of the cross. The

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idea of “substitution” must not be construed to mean that Jesus suffered for us so as to leave us standing idly by totally uninvolved—“in fact, we suffer with him” (Rom. 8:17). “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Rom. 6:3). “We have been united with him in a death like his” (verse 5). “We have died with Christ” (verse 8). “For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died” (2 Cor. 5:14). “I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:19). “I want to know Christ and...the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death” (Phil. 3:10).

The believer's participation in the death of Christ implies a moral or ethical life as the appropriate response to grace. Putting on the Lord Jesus Christ is not some mystical experience but a practical demand to live honorably, giving no thought to the flesh that it might gratify its desires (Rom. 13:13–14). The Christian's “sharing in the blood of Christ” (1 Cor. 10:16) is a call to make the humiliation of the cross the benchmark of their daily lives.

Ninth, although it is the cross that is the center of God's redemptive act, the New Testament associates the crucifixion closely with the resurrection. If Jesus remained in the grave, his death would be a tragic martyrdom, but not an atonement for sin.¹¹ “This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power” (Acts 2:23–24). “It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:24–25).¹² “It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us” (Rom. 8:34). “He died for all, so that

those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them” (2 Cor. 5:15). The resurrection is the Father's vindication of the Son—the divine approval of the saving power of his death.

Tenth, the experience of the cross (and the resurrection) demands a corresponding ethical life. “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). “We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin” (Rom. 6:6). “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:24–25). “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14). “You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God...Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed” (Col. 3:3, 5). “He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:14).



As with all relationships, our behavior issues from the gift of fellowship with God; it never earns it.

The fact that Paul uses the crucial events of the gospel, that is, the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus, as images to describe the believer's life, demonstrates that although Christ's cross and the Christian's conduct are distinct, they are never detached from one another.¹³ "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus *for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life* (Eph. 2:8–10, italics added). The gospel brings us into the awesome privilege of having "fellowship...with the Father" (1 John 1:3). Once we receive forgiveness (or reconciliation) we are brought into a relationship with God. We should also recall that "righteousness" in Hebrew thought is a relational concept.¹⁴ Healthy relationships—whether with parents, spouse, friends or children—always impact on behavior.¹⁵ We may not be the perfect spouse, friend or parent, but love will always constrain us to act with genuine care for each other.

Likewise in our fellowship with God, "the love of Christ urges us on" (2 Cor. 5:14). However, as with all relationships, our behavior issues from the gift of fellowship with God; it never earns it. Friendship and love by their very nature are un-earnable. No matter how long or faithful we have been in a friendship, the relationship remains an undeserved gift from the other. We enter it and respond to it appropriately and gratefully. "Whoever says, 'I abide in him,' ought to walk just as he walked" (1 John 2:6).

Behind every sincere gift is the giver. When we receive the gift of the gospel, we receive the Giver. "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him" (Col. 2:6). Such a life is not an optional extra ("Would you like fries with that?"), but an essential consequence of believing in the gospel. We ever stand in need of grace, but we are also constantly challenged to

live the life of grace. "And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them" (2 Cor. 5:15).

Relationships are reciprocal; there is a mutual giving and receiving (never "taking"). What can we give God in response to his "incredible gift" (2 Cor. 9:15)? Like the Corinthians, who "gave themselves first to the Lord" (2 Cor. 8:5), we give ourselves to him "as a living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1). "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another," "since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 3:16; 4:11). And love is an active, doing noun, and not simply a feeling.

So which theory of the atonement embraces all of the ten criteria listed above? None of them do. They all have their strengths and their weaknesses. Atonement theories tend to emphasize several aspects of the biblical data, but fail to integrate them all into a single frame. Perhaps attempts to do so are misdirected in the first place. Indeed, just as opposing guy ropes hold a tower upright, so the New Testament's contrasting metaphors prevent us from distorting the meaning of the atonement. The truth of the gospel is so profound and sublime that we must learn to think of several disparate pictures at the same time in order to retain a balanced view of the extraordinary "mystery of the gospel" (Eph. 6:19)—the love of God revealed in the cross.¹⁶ ■

Notes and References

1. Some of the best known theories are: Satisfaction (Anselm, 1033–1109; Robert Dale, 1829–1895); Governmental (Hugo Grotius, 1583–1645), Christus Victor (Gustaf Aulén, 1879–1977); Penal Substitution (James Denney, 1856–1917, J. I. Packer, 1926–); Moral Influence (Abelard, 1079–1142, Horace Bushnell, 1802–1876, Hastings Rashdall, 1858–1924); and Vicarious Penitence (J. McCleod Campbell, 1800–1872).

2. Unless stated otherwise, all texts are quoted from the NRSV.

3. "Many" here contrasts with "one" and should be understood as meaning "all others." This is true of other texts such as Rom. 5:15, 19; Heb. 9:28.

4. Author's translation.

5. "The whole activity of Christ which we find witnessed to in the Bible is not the means of extorting forgiveness from God; it is rather from the beginning the expression of God's forgiveness." R. P. C. Hanson. *Mystery and Imagination: Reflections on Christianity*. (London: SPCK, 1976), 39.

6. Hooker, Morna D. "Interchange in Christ," *JTS* n.s. 22 (1971), 349–61; *idem*, "Interchange and Atonement," *BJRL* 60 (1977–78), 462–81; *idem*, "Interchange and Suffering," in William Horbury and Brian McNeil (eds). *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament*. (Cambridge: CUP, 1981), 70–83.

7. "For our sakes, God treated him who knew no sin, as though he knew sin, so that God might treat us, who know sin, as though we did not know sin [that is, as the righteousness of God in him]" (author's paraphrase).

8. Hooker (see footnote 7) takes the noun "righteousness" with the qualifying genitive "of God," to mean that believers share with God the task of presenting the "rightwising" power of the gospel.

9. For defenses of punishment (penal) and substitution as an essential part of Christ's atoning work see Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James (eds). *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical, and Practical Perspectives*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004); I. Howard Marshall. *Aspects of the Atonement: Cross and Resurrection in the Reconciling of God and Humanity*. (London/Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2007); Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach. *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Substitution*. (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2007).

10. Alternatives to the idea of the cross as punishment can be found in J. Denny Weaver. *The Nonviolent Atonement*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker. *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts*. (Downers Grove/Carlisle: IVP/ Paternoster, 2003); Hans Boersma. *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004); Scot McKnight. *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, Atonement Theory*. (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2005); Mark D. Baker, (ed). *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of the Atonement*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006); S.

Mark Heim. *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*. (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2006). Heim reviews seven titles on the atonement in *Christian Century*, March 22 (2005): 20–25.

11. For a robust defense of the resurrection as integral to the atonement see Michael F. Bird. "'Raised for our Justification': A Fresh Look at Romans 4:25," *Colloquium* 35.1 (2003): 31–46; *idem*, *The Saving Righteousness of God*. (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2007).

12. This should be read as a rhetorical antithesis: Christ was "delivered-up-and-raised for our justification which was necessitated by our trespasses" (K. E. Kirk. *The Epistle to the Romans in the Revised Version with Introduction and Commentary*. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1937), 192. On this passage see Michael F. Bird. "Justified by Christ's Resurrection: A Neglected Aspect of Paul's Doctrine of Justification," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 22 (2004): 79–91.

13. To use the traditional language, justification always elicits sanctification.

14. Dunn, James D. G. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1998), 341, 386–387.

15. By the time I married in my thirty-third year, I'd kept house for several years as a bachelor. In this solitary environment I developed several bad habits: books everywhere, bath mat never hung up, etcetera. When I discovered early in the marriage that these traits annoyed my wife, I tried (with considerable success) to change my ways. As true lovers try to please each other, so it is with our friendship with the Lord, "We make it our aim to please him" (2 Cor. 5:9); that's how we "ought to live and to please God" (1 Thess. 4:1); "we obey his commandments and do what pleases him" (1 John 3:22).

16. In the context of Ephesians, Paul is talking about the inclusion of the Gentiles with the Jews into the covenantal people of God.

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