



# Starting a New Conversation about the Atonement

BY BONNIE DWYER

How does  
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It has been described as the most perplexing question about salvation. How does the death of Jesus solve the problem of sin? As Richard Rice writes in *The Reign of God*, “Christians have never reached a consensus in answer to this question.” He points out that while there is an orthodox doctrine of the person of Christ, there is “no corresponding doctrine of his work.” Instead, there are several prominent theories of atonement. “Each has influenced the thinking of the church from time to time, but none has ever enjoyed unanimous support.”

So, too, within Adventism, where the ideas about atonement have undergone shifts. “The first Adventist statement of belief, the Declaration of 1872, denied that the atonement began on the cross. In *Questions on Doctrine*, the atonement is presented as having been completed on the cross. In the intervening period it was generally believed that the atonement began on the cross and was completed in the heavenly sanctuary” (Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 2nd ed., 84). It is thus not surprising, then, that in 1952, Francis D. Nichol wrote an editorial in the *Review and Herald* responding to the question “Do Adventists Minimize Christ’s Atonement?” The criticism of Adventists suggesting that they reject the atonement of Christ happens “because they believe that His atonement for sin was not completed on Calvary.” In his refutation of that argument, Nichol explained, “We do not deny the atonement; we differ with some other Christian people simply as to the *time* when the atonement does its *final* work for the believer.” Nichol said, “We believe that Christ on the cross made provision for the atonement for all sinners. Thus all who will may be

saved. But we believe also that only those who ‘endure unto the end . . . shall be saved.’” This means that Christ’s “saving work of atonement cannot be completed until the end.” Two decades later, the debate within Adventism about the atonement paralleled that in the larger Evangelical world—between the Penal Substitutionary and the Moral Influence theories of atonement.

At the Adventist Forum Conference, September 16–18, we will return to the subject of atonement with twenty-first-century eyes. We have invited Gregory Boyd to be our conversation partner. Boyd describes his view of atonement as being in alignment with the “Christus Victor” view of the historic-orthodox church. “I believe that Jesus died as our substitute and experienced the death-consequences of sin in our place. But I do not believe this means the Father needed to satisfy his own wrath by violently pouring it out on his Son in order to forgive us and reconcile us to himself.” In this issue of the journal we carry several articles to inform that conference conversation. Jean Sheldon, who will respond to Boyd at the conference, starts us off with a look at Divine wrath and appeasement in ancient times. We have included a couple of articles from the past that show us major elements in the Adventist conversation about atonement. And we have included the reading list being shared at the conference (that lists books by several of the conference speakers on a variety of topics).

With a new discussion of atonement, we hope to bring new appreciation for and understanding of what Christ accomplished on the cross and what that means for us as Christians today. ■

Bonnie Dwyer is editor of *Spectrum* magazine.