

NT631: Romans (Eng Tex)

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Atonement Theory

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How to interpret the bible is an ancient debate that exists to this day. Major influencers such as tradition, culture, and context shape how the bible is interpreted. With the rise of relativism in western culture, what may be true for one generation is challenged as false by the next generation. However, if scripture is divine revelation to know God, it is of paramount importance to seek objective truth. In particular, many scholars argue the truth of atonement is central to the biblical narrative and character of God. Atonement reveals God's justice, holiness, wrath, mercy, and grace. Recently, modern scholars have attempted to repudiate orthodox views towards atonement as they consider this view to paint God as brutal, unjust, and sadistic.¹The big question in this paper will be, "Is there a true biblical view of atonement?" In order to answer this question, Christ's atonement will be analyzed. What has Christ accomplished through atonement, what believers receive through atonement, and to what extent. Popular atonement theories will be compared and contrasted with Paul the Apostle's biblical view of atonement. What is at stake when establishing atonement theory? Can a false view of atonement lead to a powerless cross, a lifeless church, a lack of motivation towards holy living, and a declining church? Perhaps only when atonement is viewed through the lens of truth will Christians have the power, freedom, and motivation for Christian living.

Traditionally, scholars have likened the early church to the teachings of Origen and the Ransom theory. This theory believes that the death of Christ was a ransom sacrifice paid to

¹ Murphy, George L. "Chiasmic cosmology and atonement." (*Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 60, no. 4 2008), 214

Satan. In this exchange, Christ paid Satan and satisfied the debt and bondage of the souls in bondage to Satan due to sin. Origen, who lived in the second and third century is a good representative of the early Church. The early Church was right in believing that something of cosmic proportions happened through Jesus.² According to Origen, his commentaries state that the blood of Christ in his circumcision and then on the cross is a ransom paid to Satan. Does scripture prove the validity to this argument? Revelations 1:17-18 says “*I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.*” 1 Peter 3:18-19 says Jesus “*went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison...*” Although Ransom theory contains elements of truth, it fails because it exaggerates Satan to a false position of authority thus promoting the heresy of dualism. Satan is secondary in Atonement as Paul clearly demonstrates throughout the book of Romans. Paul argues that atonement has to do with paying a legal debt to God. Paul mentions Satan just one time in the entire book of Romans. In the book of Job, Satan has limited authority dependent on what God allows him. Origen was most likely influenced by Gnosticism which permeated culture.³ Did Jesus fight Satan? In a general sense yes. How? Jesus was tempted by Satan to sin, yet despite temptation he fulfilled the law (Romans 8:4). Romans 5:10 states that humans are at enmity with God. The bigger issue is not human enmity with Satan, but human enmity with God. The wrath of God is more terrible than bondage to Satan. Paul explains in Romans 13:1,1 that humans will stand before the judgement seat of Christ. They won’t face Satan, but God himself. This is the real dilemma facing humanity. According to Douglas Moo, peace with God comes through justification not through deliverance from Satan.⁴ Romans 5:9 says the blood of Christ saves sinners from God’s wrath. Therefore, scripture debunks Ransom

² Edwards, Mark J., "Origen", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2018 (Metaphysics Research Lab Stanford University), 2

³ Edwards. *Origen*. 3

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans: Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014) 87

theory and exposes that although it has facets of truth, it misses the truth of atonement. Douglas Moo states that Romans 5 makes the final point in that the language of salvation is ultimately deliverance from sin and the wrath of God.⁵ Much is at stake with this view of atonement. If Ransom Atonement Theory is true then Satan is not only powerful but the main problem. This view could lead to superstition where Christians spend their time and energy not repenting but fighting Satan. This view promotes dualism where the primary battle is between good and evil, God and Satan. The reality is Satan is a created being, powerful but unequal to God. A good illustration to show the relationship between God and Satan is a dog on a leash. God holds the leash and only grants Satan dominion where God allows it.

Many scholars argue that *Christus Victor* is the true classical view of atonement with deep roots in the early church. Gustav Aulen, a Swedish professor of the early 20th century brought popularity to this view of atonement. Subsequently, much debate arose as to its validity and role in church history.⁶ Like Ransom theory, *Christus Victor* emphasizes that God, through Jesus, defeats the powers of sin, death, and the devil. Through Jesus' death, God and man are reconciled. This viewpoint has less of a dualistic philosophy compared to Ransom Theory, but nonetheless elements of dualism remain.⁷ By analyzing atonement theory, glimpses of God's character are revealed. For instance, if *Christus Victor* is absolutely true, God's motivation for Jesus' death was not so much an act of sacrificial love towards mankind but rather an act to defeat the evil forces of the universe. Therefore, in this viewpoint, the cross's primary purpose is to fight evil, not to remove guilt. If this view is seen as true, an emphasis is placed on the social gospel where the focus becomes the deconstruction of evils such as nationalism, racism,

⁵ Moo. *Encountering Romans*, 87

⁶ Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (trans. A. G. Herbert; New York: Macmillan, 1931). 4

⁷ Peter, Ted. *Atonement in Anselm and Luther, Second Thoughts About Gustaf Aulen's Christus Victor* (Lutheran Quarterly 24, 1972) 301

capitalism, and or other ideologies. Interestingly, Paul uses the word sin 22 times in Romans 5 and each time he uses the singular form not the plural form of sin.⁸ Why is this important? Paul is saying the problem is that people individually are under the power of sin. Individually, people need freedom from sin and its source of power which is the law according to 1 Corinthians 15:56. Christus Victor therefore misses the crux of atonement in that all people will individually be held accountable to God due to their transgressions. Yes, people are often helpless victims in bondage to evil and yes Gods opposes oppressive systems but the main issue is man committing sin. Christus Victor has the potential to embrace universal salvation where humans are simply captives in a cosmic battle between good and evil in which Jesus saves all mankind from the forces of darkness. In this wrong view, the cross is minimized and removes a personal salvation.

Moral Influence Theory gained its popularity from Peter Abelard in the 12th Century.⁹ Abelard raised a moral objection to substitution atonement saying, “how cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything. If an innocent Christ suffers, why should a loving God feel good about that or count it to our credit?” In the same vein, modern feminist theologians such as Rita Nakashima Brock denounce orthodox atonement as “divine child abuse.”¹⁰ Abelard believed the cross was an inspiration and model for correct behavior rather than a transaction that legally pardons guilt. In Moral Influence Theory, Christ’s primary goal is to be bring positive to change to humanity. In support of this view, Christianity has brought positive to change to the world through art, music, hospitals, schools, orphanages, and social justice. Moral Influence Theory makes Jesus’ death on the cross a symbol of heroic martyrdom and the purest form of love and morality.¹¹

⁸ Moo. *Encountering Romans*. 95

⁹ Placher William. *How Does Jesus Save*. (Christian Century 126, 2009), 23

¹⁰ Placher. *How does Jesus Save*. 23

¹¹ Placher. *How does Jesus Save*. 24

Moral Influence Atonement theory in reality establishes Christianity as similar to other religions. Like all religions, there is a moral code and an inspiring leader. Most religions say, “follow these rules and be moral if you do, there will be blessings.” Yes, it is beneficial to be nice to others just like it is beneficial for a society to care for the poor. However, if Christianity is just good advice and a moral code to follow it is not gospel, it is not good news, it is actually bad news. Why bad news? Well first, Jesus himself said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, ‘be perfect as I am perfect,’ and, “your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.” Jesus went on to unpack that trying to follow the law and be a good person is simply not enough to be right with God. If one wants to be right with God they must even have perfect motives and attitudes continuously. Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery, but I say to you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart.”

Imagine telling people, “Jesus died to inspire you. Now live radically generous lives. Love your enemies. Give up your wealth and power and forsake everything. When an enemy strikes you don’t get bitter, don’t seek revenge, rather turn the other cheek.” Can people live a holy life without good doctrine? The answer is no. Nobody can live how Jesus lived and to try would lead to crushing defeat and depression. To become a Buddhist, one makes oneself a Buddhist. To become a Muslim, one makes oneself a Muslim. To become a Christian, one can’t become a Christian unless God opens the heart and causes them to be born again. People won’t obey when the mastery of their life is challenged. When obeying means losing something, people won’t love or obey unless there is heart change.

The message of the cross is so much more than Jesus being a good moral example. The message of the cross is the fulfillment of the law. Paul the Apostle himself says in Romans 3:21,

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” According to Craig S. Keener, the law revealed human sin but was never intended to make people righteous. Keener explains that God’s righteousness is through faith in Jesus and the primary emphasis of Christianity is on faith rather than dependence on the law.¹² Interestingly, what Keener is proposing is that the foundation of Christianity is built upon what Jesus Christ has done for humanity, not what humanity does for God. This is radically different than all other religions, as their primary focus is on human effort and morality. In other letters Paul says in Galatians 3:2, “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” Paul answers his question by saying, “Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham (not human effort).” The message of the bible is the gospel. The good news is that God doesn’t just ask people to be good, he makes them good, by transforming them. It is only by knowing God and receiving his power, spirit, righteousness, and love that Christians are able to be moral with right motives. When Christians are melted by the message of the cross and experience the love of God in Christ Jesus they are transformed. This transformation does lead to morality, as a byproduct of what Jesus has done. This is why Moral influence theory is very dangerous. It is a false gospel that strips Christianity of its real power to change people.

Evidence to support the heresy of moral influence theory may be found in the numerical data of church attendance and growth of the 20th century. Churches not holding to orthodox atonement are seeing rapid numerical decline, whereas the evangelical ranks holding to orthodox atonement are often growing rapidly.¹³ Reginald Bibby and Merlin B. Brinkerhoff have found

¹² Craig S. Keener, *Romans: A New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, Oregon, Wipf & Stock, 2009) 58

¹³ Bibby, Reginald W., and Merlin B. Brinkerhoff. *Circulation of the Saints Revisited: A Longitudinal Look at Conservative Church Growth* (*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22, no. 3, 1983) 253

that churches that hold to orthodox views of atonement are more likely to share their faith, use the term born-again, and retain numbers at a higher rate than liberal churches.¹⁴ Reginald and Brinkerhoff argue other factors influence church growth like geography and demographics. Despite the many factors of church growth, it is hard to argue the power of truth. Paul the Apostle said in Galatians 3:10, “all who rely on works of the law are under a curse...” Are churches that discard orthodox atonement putting their entire congregations back under the curse of the law? Moral Theory Atonement limits its adherents to therapeutic moral deism where immorality and relativism thrive. The focus under this false doctrine becomes the works of man not the grace of God.

Church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian probably embraced an atonement that most likely resembles Penal Substitution Theory.¹⁵ Tertullian addressed the issue of Christ fulfilling the law and prophets in his book entitled *An Answer to the Jews*. In this piece Tertullian argues that Christ is the fulfillment of the Passover Lamb in Exodus 12, sacrificial goats of Leviticus 16, and the curse of Numbers 21:4-9.¹⁶ Tertullian would encourage his disciples that the cross is the center of salvation because Christians were bought by Christ and their lives now belong to him.¹⁷ Many attribute Martin Luther as the founder of Penal Substitution but it is more likely that Luther simply returned to biblical truth. In Penal substitutionary theory, the cross becomes the means by which God’s wrath is removed from sinners. Jesus becomes the perfect and spotless lamb who fulfills the law for mankind and also receives the full brunt of sin’s curse against humanity. Jesus is cursed and punished (penal) as a substitute in the place of sinners thus demonstrating God’s love and justice simultaneously. This

¹⁴ Reginald, Brinkerhoff. *A Longitudinal Look at Conservative Church Growth*. 254

¹⁵ Ensor, Peter. Tertullian and Penal Substitutionary Atonement. (Evangelical Quarterly 86 (2)) 13-131

¹⁶ Ensor. *Tertullian*.134

¹⁷ Ensor. *Tertullian*. 134

theory is concerned with the legality of sin and paints the picture of God being a just God. Romans 3:19 says “the whole world is accountable to God,” According to Douglas Moo, the language Paul is using here is legal.¹⁸ This logic is sound because Paul uses words such as justification and propitiation, both legal terms. The significance of these words and especially the meaning of propitiation builds the foundation for atonement. Hilasterion in the Greek is used to refer to the Mercy Seat, the cover over the ark where the High Priest sprinkled sacrificial blood.¹⁹ This Greek word is used two times in Romans and Hebrews. In both instances, the context is Christ as the mercy seat of the New Covenant.

As mentioned before, many modern scholars vehemently oppose Penal Substitutionary Theory as they believe it portrays God as an advocate of domestic abuse. Christian feminists for example see this view as archaic and brutish as it pits the father against the son in a display of violence. Pacifists too may cringe at the thought of a human sacrifice.²⁰ **Beilby, Et all, pg 70.** The culture which one lives heavily influences the lens through which one interprets the bible. Therefore, objective biblical context is crucial to understand motifs such as atonement.

John the Baptist in the gospels revealed Jesus to be the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Why would God need to take away the sins of the world? Humanism would say people are basically good and there is no need. First, the bible reveals there is a clash between the sinfulness of humanity and the holiness of God. Death therefore although common is not natural but rather a consequence of sin. When King David sinned and took a census, the Lord responds in 1 Chronicles 21 by “sending a pestilence on Israel, and 70,000 men of Israel fell...” David then, “offers burnt offerings and peace offerings to the Lord and the Lord

¹⁸ Moo. *Encountering Romans*. 60

¹⁹ Moo. *Encountering Romans*. 69

²⁰ Beilby, James K, Paul R. Eddy. *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (Spectrum Multiview Book Series. Downers Grove, IL:IVP Academic, 2006) 70

commanded the angel to put his sword back in its sheath” (1 Chron 21:27). God is a God of justice and sin must be dealt with. If there is not atonement through sacrifice, sinners pay the legal debt owed to God. There will either be atonement to remove sin or a day of reckoning where humans pay for sin. When Israel failed to keep the covenant and perform sacrifices, Jerusalem fell and the people were exiled to pay for sin.

A helpful illustration to understand God’s justice is that of a referee at a football game. Imagine, a defensive player commits a brutal face mask or personal foul against an offensive opponent. If the referee did not throw the flag and impose a penalty, it would be unjust to “just let it slide.” Imagine if the referee said, “well, I love that player, I’ll just overlook the penalty.” Would this really be love? Can you imagine the reaction from the fans? They would be livid and for good reason! The referee can’t lower the standard to demonstrate love. This is why Jesus didn’t come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. (Matthew 5:17). God doesn’t lower the standard but instead he fulfills the standard thus demonstrating the importance of justice and the law.

Furthermore, God knowing the sinful condition of mankind set up the sacrificial system. According to Thomas R. Schreiner, God requires perfect obedience and does not lower the standard. If God did not require perfect obedience there would be no need for the sacrificial system for forgiveness of sin.²¹ The sacrificial system throughout the bible reveals that God will not compromise his justice. Gracefully, God has devised a plan for salvation that reveals not only his justice but also his deep love for humanity. Christ is God’s salvation plan because only Jesus Christ can do what humanity is unable to do, fulfill the law. According to Paul, in Romans chapter 8, Jesus fulfills the law and does what sinful humans are unable to do (Romans 8:3-4). Best yet, the God-man Jesus forever changes himself to be both God and man in order to save

²¹ Beilby, Eddy. *The Nature of Atonement*. 74

mankind. According to Dr. Timothy Keller, Jesus reveals his justice to humanity in that they are far more sinful than they dare imagine but are yet far more loved and valuable than they could ever dream of. Keller argues that God does not set his justice aside, rather he turns it on himself. The cross doesn't compromise God's wrath and love rather it satisfies them.²² The Cross in the context Penal Substitution most accurately demonstrates the vastness of God's divine justice and prodigal love.

Many today may argue that Moral Atonement Theory best demonstrates God's love. However, if God is not just, his love is superficial. Imagine a parent not having any boundaries for their kids, would this be love? No this would be child abuse. Furthermore, if God is only a God of wrath there is little motivation for benevolence. Imagine, a cold and overbearing parent who demands obedience but shows no love or sympathy. This experience leads to trauma because fear can never produce love. Penal Substitution Theory reveals the cross satisfies the love of God and the wrath of God. Paul speaks of this in Romans 3:26, "So that he (God) might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Romans 2:4 says, "God's kindness is meant to lead to repentance." Paul is saying, God is just and humans will pay for their sin unless someone pays it for them. This is the love of God in Christ Jesus, that Christ came to rescue sinners and pay the debt they could never pay. Jesus therefore receives the wrath of God by dying in the place of sinners. Not only does Jesus die for sin but he imputes the blessing he secured by living a sinless life. The end result is sinners are forgiven and receives the ultimate blessing. What is this blessing that Jesus secures? Reconciliation, justification, and redemption through the love of Christ. The cross worked, and Christians have access to God. Through Jesus man gets a deeper and more intimate covenant relationship than one could fathom. Therefore, in

²² Timothy Keller. *Romans: It's for you.* (The Good Book Company, 2014) 84

order to truly understand the love of God one must fully understand the wrath of God. Only then, can one see the depth of God's holiness and what true love really is in its purest form.

In conclusion all of the theories above recognize to some extent the multifaceted character of God and atonement. Christus Victor and Ransom Theory rightly demonstrate how Christ has rescued humanity from the dominion of evil and demonic powers. Moral Atonement Theory rightly shows that those who receive Christ do become moral people who follow Christ. However, it is the foundational nature of Penal Substitutionary Theory that exemplifies the truth of God's nature, character, and atonement. The fundamental problem for humanity is not Satanic opposition nor a lack of social justice, but that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Much is at stake when preaching the cross as Paul the Apostle said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of salvation to everyone who believes..." (Romans 1:16) This power comes from revealing the full counsel of God's Word. God is a God of love and justice.

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