

# Six Major Atonement Theories Summarized (Briefly).

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## 1. Ransom Theory

The Ransom Theory of atonement was one of the earliest major theories for the Atonement (how Jesus' death works to save us), as well as one of the most popular in the first 1,000 years of Christianity.

- Description: According to this theory Adam & Eve's sin transferred some kind of legal ownership/authority of humanity over to Satan. God offered Jesus as a ransom in order to buy humanity back. Satan took the offer and killed Jesus, not knowing he would rise again, thus setting humanity free.
- Key Bible Passages:  
Direct "Ransom" language: Mk 10:45; Matt 20:28; 1 Tim 2:5-6.  
Redemption/Purchase language: Eph 1:7; Col 1:13-14; 1 Pet 1:18-19; Titus 2:14.  
Liberation/Victory language: Heb 2:14-15; Col 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8.
- Who killed Jesus? Satan working through sinful human beings (1 Cor 2:7-8; Lk 22:3-4; Jn 13:2, 27; 14:30).
- Criticism(s): Why would Adam & Eve's sin give legal ownership/authority over humanity to Satan? Satan is himself a sinner, so why would God – the creator of both Satan and human beings – be forced to pay Satan for humanity's release?

## 2. Christus Victor Theory

Along with Ransom Theory, Christus Victor is widely considered to be the dominant theory of the Atonement throughout Church history, especially the first thousand years. C.S. Lewis's famous story "The Chronicles of Narnia," beautifully portrays Christus Victor in the scene where the witch kills Aslan.

- Description: At the cross Jesus defeated the power(s) of Satan, Sin, and Death, thus liberating humanity from bondage. The difference with Ransom Theory is that Christus Victor views the cross more as a rescue/liberation, rather than a financial transaction/payment. In both theories, the cross somehow liberates humanity from Satan, Sin, and Death.
- Key Bible passages.  
Victory over Satan & Powers: Col 2:14-15; Heb 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8.  
Satan defeated: John 12:31; 14:30; 16:1.  
Sin & Death overcome: Heb 2:14-15; 1 Cor 15:54-57.  
Liberation/Rescue language: Lk 4:18-19; Col 1:13-14.
- Criticism(s): Very few Christians in history would disagree with Christus Victor outright, but a number today would say it is incomplete. Proponents of Penal Substitution, for example, would say it doesn't deal with human guilt, and God's justice, and that, though it does a good job explaining passages like Colossians 2 and Hebrews 2, it doesn't account for passages like Romans 3 and Isaiah 53.

## 3. Reversal (2<sup>nd</sup> Adam) Theory

Also important during the first thousand years of Christian history, this one is often forgotten in modern times. It is sometimes also called "Recapitulation" theory.

- Description: In this view, Christ is seen as the new Adam who reverses the effects of the first Adam's failures. Whereas the first Adam disobeyed, Christ obeyed perfectly, living a sinless life. And in the same way that the first Adam's disobedience brought death to the whole human race, so the perfect obedience of Jesus brings life for the whole human race. If Adam's disobedience can affect the entire human race, so can Christ's obedience, but in the opposite direction.
- Key Bible passages: Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:21-22; Heb 2:17-18.

- Criticism(s): This theory is based on the idea that all human beings share in (or participate in) one universal human nature. Thus, what one human being does (eg. Adam) can automatically have consequences for everyone else – like a virus that enters through one part of a body, then spreads through the whole body. Though this was a common way of looking at the world in ancient times, and in some group-centered cultures today, it can be questioned whether this is how things actually work. Do all individual human beings on the planet actually share in one unified universal entity called “human nature?” Is this shared entity a real, tangible thing? It seems more like a metaphorical way of looking at the human experience, not an actual, literal thing.

#### 4. Satisfaction Theory

Popularized by Anselm of Canterbury in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Satisfaction theory says that the biggest problem facing humanity is not enslavement to Satan, but rather God’s wrath.

- Description: In this view, every human sin is a personal affront to God that brings dishonour to his name. As Lord over the Universe, God is obligated to avenge his honour with wrathful punishment. Thus, in this theory, Christ’s brutal death “satisfies” God’s need to avenge his honour, thereby saving humanity from God’s avenging wrath. For people living under the feudal system in medieval Europe this made sense because in their culture a lord’s honour must always be avenged, and God was viewed very much like a cosmic feudal lord.
- Key Bible passages: Any passages that talk about Jesus’ death as being a sacrifice (eg. Heb 9:11-14; 10:10-14; Eph 5:2).
- Criticism(s): Jesus’ death certainly was a sacrifice, but that need not have anything to do with God’s honour or vengeance. Ancient Israel did not think of sacrificed animals as having been “punished” by God, rather, blood was seen as a cleansing agent (like soap) which could wash the stain of their sins away (eg. Lev 16:30; 19; 16). The book of Hebrews makes this connection clear, arguing that Jesus’ blood was needed to cleanse us from the stain of our sins (Heb 9:11-14; 10:10-14), not because God needed to take vengeance on us.

Christians who hold to Ransom Theory or Christus Victor also agree that Jesus’ death was a sacrifice, but again, not in the sense of being killed by God. Quite the opposite! In those views Jesus’ sacrifice is seen as the equivalent of a soldier who steps into the line of enemy fire in order to protect his fellow soldiers. The enemy killed Jesus, not God.

Overall, Satisfaction Theory seems to be a relic of the Middle Ages, something that made sense to people living under the feudal honour system of medieval Europe, but not something that is actually universally true of God.

#### 5. Penal Substitution Theory

Closely related to Satisfaction Theory, Penal (Penalty) Substitution took the place of Satisfaction Theory in 1500s Protestant Europe<sup>1</sup> as the most popular theory of Atonement, a place it continues to hold among modern Western, evangelical Christians.

- Description: Developed and systematized by John Calvin, this view teaches that it is God’s *justice* – not his honour – which demands he punish (brutally) all human sin. Arising within the increasingly legal and judicial culture of Western Europe (as feudalism collapsed), this theory frames salvation primarily in terms of a cosmic courtroom where God’s justice must be upheld and human law-breaking punished. On the

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the Eastern Orthodox Church – situated in Eastern Europe, Greece, Asia Minor (modern Turkey), the Balkans and what later became Russia – never embraced either the Satisfaction or Penal Substitution theories. To this day they have always held to some form of either Ransom Theory or Christus Victor, mixed with Recapitulation.

cross, Jesus willingly bore the penalty that we deserve for our law-breaking, thus satisfying God's need for justice so that we do not need to be brutally punished ourselves.

- Key Bible Passages: Basically any passages of Scripture that talk about Jesus bearing our sins, or "justification," or God's wrath against sin can be used to support Penal Substitution. (eg. Isa 53:4-6; 10-12; Rom 3:23-26; 5:8-10; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13; 1 Pet 2:24)
- Criticisms: Jesus certainly did bear our sins, and God certainly does have wrath against sin, but neither of these things mean that God had to brutally punish Jesus on the cross in order for us to be saved.

Jesus certainly did bear our *sins* on the cross (2 Cor 5:21), but that is different from him bearing our *punishment*.

- 1) Much of the New Testament's modelling of Jesus' death on the cross is based on the Old Testament Day of Atonement (see Lev 16). On that day a scapegoat would be chosen to "bear the sins" of Israel by carrying them out of the camp into the wilderness (Lev 16:22). This goat was not punished in any way it was simply sent out of the camp to carry away the sins of the people. Which is what Jesus did for us on the cross.
- 2) Another way that Christians have historically pictured Jesus bearing our sins is in the sense that he entered fully into our human existence and experienced fully the consequences of our sin: suffering, alienation from God, and the ultimate consequence – death. He bore our sins in the sense of entering into those consequences and feeling our pain, not in the sense that God had to brutally hurt him in order to assuage his wrath. These are just two ways, out of many, that we can understand the idea of Jesus bearing our sins, which don't involve God brutally punishing him instead of us.

Which brings up another question: How would punishing an innocent victim even count as *justice*? There are cases from medieval Europe where a royal/noble family would employ a lower-class, non-family member, as a "whipping boy." When one of the royal children misbehaved, the whipping boy would be beaten instead of the offending child. Is that justice? Not only is not justice, it is *twice* the injustice: first, the guilty party has still not been punished (injustice) AND an innocent party has been punished instead (also injustice!). Two injustices instead of one. The idea that "dad" just has to punish someone, and it doesn't matter if they're the one who actually did the crime, does not meet any reasonable definition of justice.

Oftentimes Christians try to overcome this problem by switching to an analogy from the world of financial transactions: sin is likened to a money debt, which means each human being can be viewed as owing a huge debt of money to God that cannot be repaid. Thus, we are all in danger of punishment. Thankfully, however, Jesus came along and paid our debt to God at the cross. But this works only if we assume that justice works like a financial transaction, and that committing sin is like borrowing money from a bank. But is that reality? What currency did Jesus pay at the cross – pain and suffering? Did God need to collect a certain amount of pain and suffering in order to be pacified? If so, we're exactly back to the logic of the whipping boy: "Somebody has to pay with pain for this misbehavior and it doesn't matter who pays it, just so long as someone suffers."

Furthermore, there cannot be true forgiveness in this model of atonement without changing the definition of forgiveness. If justice is like a financial transaction and we say that Jesus "paid our debt at the cross," then God got *paid* – which is the opposite of forgiving us. By definition, forgiveness is the act where a creditor (the person who is owed something) releases the debtor from their debt (Matt 18:23-35; 6:12; Lk 7:41-49). In other words, the person who forgives *doesn't get paid*. That's the point. That's why it's hard. So: God either forgives us of our sins, or Jesus paid God for our sins, they can't both be true.

But isn't God just? Absolutely! Someday Jesus is going to return to earth, purge all evil from the universe, banish death (1 Cor 15:24-26; 54-57; Isa 25:8) and suffering (Rev 21:4), and heal us from all the evil we have done and experienced (Rev 22:2). That's justice: ending evil permanently, and healing creation from all its effects.

And does not God feel wrath against sin? Absolutely! He hates rape, abuse, murder, oppression, slavery and the like. But Jesus was not the outlet for that anger on the cross. The two primary outlets for God's wrath are:

- The Second Coming, when Jesus returns to rid the earth of all evil.
- In the meantime, God's wrath is primarily expressed through the natural consequences we all experience from our sinful behavior (Rom 1:18-32).

## **6. Revelation of God Theory (Moral Influence Theory).**

Developed in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by Peter Abelard in response to both the Satisfaction and Ransom Theories. Abelard rejected the idea that Jesus' death was a ransom payment to the devil, as he felt it gave too much credit to Satan, turning him into a rival god of some sort. He also rejected what he felt was the disturbing picture painted by Satisfaction Theory, of God wrathfully abusing his son Jesus on the cross.

- Description: This theory teaches that the cross was a relational event, the ultimate revelation of God's love, meant to draw all of humanity to him. In this theory Jesus bears our sins by (1) entering fully into our experience, including death, and (2) by allowing sinful humanity to attack him. He literally bore our sins: he allowed us to take all of our wrath and sin and hate and abuse out on him, absorbing it all without responding in kind. And then, by forgiving us instead of retaliating, he reconciles us to God. In this view the cross cannot be reduced to a legal problem God has to solve in order to be allowed to forgive us but instead is a deeply relational event which exposes us to the wickedness of our own hearts, thus producing repentance, and drawing us to God to ask for salvation. Which he then freely gives.
- Key Bible Passages: Any passage where the cross is described as revealing God's love, or is used as an example of self-giving sacrifice, or that focuses on the cross's ability to draw us to God and reconcile us with him.  
(Eg. John 12:32; 3:16; 15:13; Rom 5:8; Phil 2:5-8; 1 Pet 2:21; 1 John 3:16; 4:9-10, 16-19)
- Criticisms: For Christians who feel the cross needed to objectively solve some mechanistic formula in the universe,<sup>2</sup> this theory can seem to reduce the problem of sin to a psychological issue and even, perhaps, to diminish the importance of the cross. Proponents of this theory disagree, believing that the desire to figure out a mechanism for how the cross works is in part a product of the Enlightenment and modernity, and the desire to be able to scientifically explain how things work. But is the cross something which can be subjected to the scientific method, and mechanistic explanations? If not, why would a relational explanation be a "reduction" or a "diminishment" of the cross? A person's answers to these questions will go a long way in determining whether they can accept this theory or not!

**Chart summary next page ...**

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<sup>2</sup> Two examples of objective mechanisms Christians see the cross as needing to solve would be: (1) Balance some cosmic scale of sin and justice; or (2) Pay out some kind of legal contract Satan held over humankind.

<b>Six Major Atonement Theories</b>	
1. <b>Ransom</b>	Pay/Defeat <b>Satan</b>
2. <b>Christus Victor</b>	
3. <b>Reversal (2<sup>nd</sup> Adam)</b>	Heal Human Nature
4. <b>Satisfaction</b>	Satisfy <b>God's</b> Honour/Justice
5. <b>Penal Substitution</b>	
6. <b>Revelation of God (Moral Influence)</b>	Reveal God to humankind, inspire repentance, draw to salvation.