

Historical Opinions as to the Nature of Christ's Atoning Death*

by Gordon C. Olson

The Apostles and early Church Fathers presented in simplicity the life and atoning death of Christ as the only way of salvation through repentance and faith, and did not concentrate on developing scientific statements on how this takes place. It appears that we can group the theories of the centuries under four main headings:

1. SATISFACTION THEORY: - Strictly vicarious and exactly equivalent to man's guilt.

A. Satisfaction to Satan, to whom man had chosen to give allegiance and must be liberated by Christ paying to him the ransom price (common from 3rd to 11th centuries): Irenaeus (130?-202?); Origen (185?-254?); Gregory of Nyssa (335-399); Augustine (354-430); Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153).

B. Satisfaction to God the Father universally for all mankind, through a sacrificial death of the Divine Logos who had become one with lost humanity: Athanasius (296-373), the great defender of the Deity of Christ. In salvation the goodness of God must act consistent with His truthfulness and honor, which involves the principle of justice. "Christ as man endured death for us, inasmuch as He offered Himself for that purpose to the Father." Man must be freed not only from the penalty of sin, but from sin itself and be quickened into life.

C. Satisfaction to the ethical nature or justice of God, which demands absolute legal vindication: Anselm (1033-1109), said to have written the first scientific treatise on the Atonement, 1098. God rightfully demands honor and supremacy which man has refused to give, and thus has incurred a debt to God which can only be paid by punishment or by some substituted satisfaction. The God-man, Jesus Christ, with austere dignity came into our world and by His immaculate conduct and by His obedience to a gruesome suffering of death acquired merit before God which may be imputed to the believer as a perfect judicial standing.

D. Satisfaction through a mystical union or a sacrificial bearing of the penalty of sin, providing a "relative satisfaction" as distinguished from an absolute strictly legal satisfaction in the full discharge of guilt, as advocated by Anselm: Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153), a pious and influential monk, typical of the majority of theological leaders from Apostolic times up to Anselm and the Reformation, who followed the descriptive statements of the New Testament without pursuing them to ultimate speculative conclusions.

E. Satisfaction to the offended holiness and justice of God through Christ's bearing the full penalty of man's sin in His vicarious death: Luther (1483-1546); Calvin (1509-1564); and early Reformation leaders, who adopted Anselm's principle of strict judicial satisfaction. The entire guilt and punishment that sinners deserve was transferred to Christ, who by His obedience in life and sufferings endured their total penalty so that sin may no longer be imputed or penalty demanded from those for whom He died, or from those who had been elected to be saved from all eternity. "Our sins were transferred to Him by imputation."

F. Satisfaction as above, with greater emphasis in early post-Reformation times upon the active righteousness of Christ being imputed to the believer as a perfect positive standing: Lutheran and Reformed (or Calvinistic) Confessions, and the Federal Headship theory developed by Cocceius (1603-1669) and more fully elaborated by Turretin (1623-1687). Under the Covenant of Works, Adam was the federal head of all mankind so his sin and its consequences is legally imputed to all.

This somewhat replaced the organic or natural relationship theory of guilt for Adam's sin advanced by Augustine (354-430). Through the Covenant of Grace, the Lord Jesus is the federal Head of those who are to experience salvation, being appointed to bear the full guilt of their sins (Adamic and personal) in an atoning death viewed as His passive obedience. By His active obedience to the full demands of Divine law, He is said to have fulfilled perfectly man's requirements and imputes His righteousness to believers so that it is legally considered to be theirs. Since in the full development of the satisfaction theory, whatever has been accomplished in the Atonement is an exact equivalent of guilt so that salvation proceeds upon the basis of strict judicial justice, in no understandable way can it be general or made for everyone in the same sense, or all will be saved since God will not demand a double payment for guilt-Christ's and the sinner's. But the sacred Atonement was made for all, with no theological reservations: Jn. 3:16-17; Mk. 16:15-16; II Co. 5:14-15; I Tim. 2:3-6; He. 2:9; I Jn. 2:1-2. The Lord Jesus as the Son of Man was under obligation to obey for Himself, since He was "born under the law" (Ga. 4:4-5). His obedience could not, therefore, be imputed to anyone, but He was free to give His life in atonement since He "committed no sin."

2. GOVERNMENTAL THEORY: - The Atonement was necessary to solve the problems of God as a Moral Governor, who lovingly desires to reconcile mankind.

A. The sufferings of Christ were necessary to the Divine government, rather than to the Divine nature: Gregory of Nazianzus (330-390). "Is it not plain that the Father received the ransom, not because He Himself required or needed it, but for the sake of the Divine government of the universe, and because man must be sanctified through the incarnation of the Son of God?" He strongly opposed the idea of a ransom paid to Satan, and could not understand why a ransom should be paid to the Father. He could only fall back on the "economy" of God and put forth no theory of satisfaction. Other early writers, like Athanasius, also mentioned God's governmental problems.

B. Christ suffered unto death in His human nature, not in His Divine nature, and thus the Atonement was not an infinite value to pay fully for the eternal punishment of sinners, but was graciously accepted by God the Father as sufficient to satisfy Divine justice: Duns Scotus (1265-1308) In line with the majority of Christian thinkers of the centuries, he held the principle that the Atonement provided a "relative satisfaction" to the justice of God and proposed his theory in opposition to Anselm, who had insisted upon absolute total equivalent satisfaction through an infinite sacrifice. He came to view the Divine will as not bound by anything fixed in the Divine nature, but free to decide upon what basis sins could be forgiven.

C. Christ, the Savior of the world, died for all men and for every man, and His grace is extended to all. His atoning sacrifice is in and of itself sufficient for the redemption of the whole world, and is intended for all by God the Father. The sacrifice of Christ is not the payment of a debt, nor is it a complete satisfaction of justice for sin. It is a Divinely-appointed condition which precedes the forgiveness of sin, just as the death of a lamb or a goat in the Mosaic economy. Christ's sufferings took the place of a penalty, so that His sufferings have the same effect in reconciling God to man, and procuring the forgiveness of sin, that the sinner's endurance of the punishment due to his sins would have had. The sufferings of Christ were not a substituted penalty, but a substitute for a penalty: Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609); Episcopius (1583-1643); Curcellaeus (1586 1659); Limborch (1633-1712); known as Arminianism. Outside Holland, Arminianism exerted considerable influence in France, Switzerland, Germany, Engl and, and America, and hence throughout the world through various denominations, especially Methodism.

D. God came to be viewed as a benevolent Ruler exercising control over moral beings by good and wise laws designed for mutual happiness of Himself and them. Regulation in a moral government is by means of promised blessings for conformity and penalties of suffering for disobedience. While God in compassionate mercy is willing to forgive or relax His just claims against rebellious moral beings upon evidence of a willingness to cease from rebellion and return to happy submission, He cannot wisely do so without some terrible measure of enlightenment and suffering by a Being of profound dignity. This must demonstrate before all the dreadful nature and consequences of sin and provide an eternal moral force against further indulgence and heart-break to Himself as well as to them: Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), a prominent Dutch jurist and Arminian theologian, who wrote an important book against Socinianism, 1617.

E. The sufferings and especially the death of Christ were sacrificial, were not the punishment of the law but were equivalent in meaning to it, were representative of it and substituted for it. The demands of the law were not satisfied by it, but the honor of the law was promoted by it as much as this honor would have been promoted by inflicting the legal penalty upon all sinners. The distributive (or vindictive) justice of God was not satisfied by it, but His general (or justice for the public good) as a responsible Moral Governor was perfectly satisfied. The active obedience or holiness of Christ made possible His virtuous death in man's behalf, but is not legally imputed to the believer. Christ's atonement was made for all men in the same sense. It was necessary on God's account to enable Him as a consistent Ruler to fulfill His moral obligations to His

subjects, when repentant sinners are pardoned through a commitment of faith (E.A. Park, 1883): New England Theology; Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758); his son (1745-1801); Nathaniel Emmons (1745-1840); Caleb Burge (1782-1838); N.W. Taylor (1786-1858); C. G. Finney (1792-1875); Congregationalists (very extensively); "New School" Presbyterians; several groups of Baptists; other groups and leaders in America and England (called "American Theology").

In the governmental theory, the Atonement is not required by the subjective nature or vindictive justice of God before mercy is extended. It is not God in isolation as the injured party, but rather God as a benevolent Ruler in relationship to His moral creatures, with great problems of reconciliation that require solution. These problems involve man's relation to God in intelligent moral government, as well as some means to convey God's very deep reactions toward sin and His abounding mercy toward man in spite of man's desperate rebellion. Man must be broken down before God in deep respect and penitence in a return to a right attitude towards God's loving regulation before forgiveness can take place. The sacred advent and atonement of Christ, therefore, is not merely a measure to discharge guilt by some calculated equivalent. It is the most profound measure conceivable, with an objective to restore a ruptured God-man relationship in all that is involved. The Atonement was, therefore, general in the absolute sense and legally discharged the guilt of no one.

3. MORAL INFLUENCE THEORY: - A manifestation of suffering Divine love was necessary to subdue man's rebellion so reconciliation could take place.

The life and sufferings of Christ were conceived to be an exhibition of Divine love to reconcile man back to God by breaking down his resistance and drawing him back into a life of fellowship with God. There is no specific necessity of satisfying the Divine nature or the problems of God's moral government. The life and sufferings of the God-Man were intended to exert a moral impression upon a hard and impenitent heart, which is thereby melted into contrition, and then received into favor by the boundless compassion of God (Abelard): Clement (185?-254?) of Alexandria; Peter Abelard (1079-1142) of France, who opposed Anselm; Horace Bushnell (1802-1876), a lawyer and New England pastor. Many liberals in theology of succeeding generations accepted his general opinions without sharing his deep sincerity.

4. ETHICAL EXAMPLE THEORY: - Sinful man has been misguided and needed a noble virtuous example to challenge him to a new way of living.

If man is going to realize his potential and be reconciled to God, he must repent and reform his ways. For this purpose Jesus Christ was miraculously brought into our world and thus was more than a mere man (Socinianism, 1600's), or was natural born and as a religious genius identified himself with God in special devotion to achieve a unique ministry to mankind (Unitarianism, 1700's). His virtuous and loving conduct in life and in death as a noble martyr showed us how we ought to love God and each other, or become converted and reconciled to God: Laelius Socinus (1525-1562) and his nephew Faustus

Socinus (1539-1604), in Poland; Unitarians, who trace their views back through Arius (256-336); and others of humanistic opinion (Christ a mere man).

THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF THE ATONEMENT

Case 1: -The Atonement was a literal or an exact payment for sin. -All are not being saved through it. -Therefore, It could not have been made for all.

Case 2: -The Atonement was a literal or an exact payment for sin. -It was made for all. - Therefore, all will be saved through it.

Case 3: -The Atonement was made for all: Is. 53:6; Lk. 2:10-11; Jn. 1:29; 3:16-17; 6:51; II Co. 5:14-15; I Tim. 2:3-6; Tit. 2:11; He. 2:9; I Jn. 2:2; also Is. 1:18; 45:22; 55:1; Eze. 18:30-32; Mt. 23:37; Mk. 16:15-16; Ro. 2:11; Re. 3:20.

- Only a minority are being saved through it: Ge. 6:5-8; Is. 53:1; Mt. 21:10; Lk. 13:23-24; 23:21; Jn. 5:40; 6:60, 67; 7:7; 16:33; Acts 8:1; 14:22; I Co. 4:13.
- Therefore, it was not a literal or an exact payment for sin.

*Excerpted from his work *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, © 1980 Bible Research Fellowship, Inc. If you are interested in reading more of Gordon Olson's works, they are available in print form from [Revival Theology Promotions](#).