

# [Theology of atonement and salvation](https://assignbuster.com/theology-of-atonement-and-salvation/)

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The view and understanding of atonement is one of the widest in Christian theology. Unlike the dogmas that define the theology of trinity and incarnation and bring unity to Christian understanding, the theology of atonement has many different views that are widely held.

The theology of atonement is one of the most important for Christians to understand, as it shapes our images of God, our understanding of salvation and how we are saved. In this essay, I will be looking at different theories of atonement and how they make a difference to our theology of salvation.

I will argue that different understandings and theories of atonement affect our theology of salvation by highlighting different aspects of salvation and answering the theological question that is found in the theology of salvation, ‘ how are we saved?’. I will first define atonement and its origins.

I will then proceed into looking at the extent of atonement and the objective and subjective nature of atonement. I will then look into more detail of five theories of atonement that have been derived from the objective and subjective views over the ages; ransom theory, satisfaction theory, moral influence, Christus Victor and penal substitution, and their implication of our understanding of salvation, by what they highlight in the theology of salvation and how they answer the question raised above.

The theology of atonement is about the restoration of the broken relationship between God and man that was accomplished in the life and death of Jesus Christ. Atonement is derived from at-one-ment and can be defined as reconciliation.

Sin has put up a barrier between God and humanity and Jesus’ life death and resurrection break down that barrier and atones us, so that we can once again have a right relationship with God. However, we must make sure to distinguish between atonement from reconciliation, which as an act is restoring a right relationship with God, is understood to be the purpose of atonement.

All Christians believe that Jesus is the Saviour of the world, however, not all agree on how he saved humanity. This is why and where the diversity of atonement arises. The understanding of how exactly God went about the act of saving and restoring humanity with himself, as there is no distinct answer found in the bible, has brought out many different understanding of atonement over the ages.

The first issue that arises when looking at atonement is the extent of atonement. Who did Jesus die for and atone? There are two common answers to this question. The first is limited atonement, which believes that Jesus died for the elect. The elect being God’s sheep and his Church and this is who atonement covers. This view is part of Calvin’s five points. The view of limited atonement arises from the misinterpretation of the words ‘ the world’ and ‘ all’ in the New Testament.

The opposing view, also the historical view, is general atonement, where Jesus died for all of humanity. This view is the classical view held by most Christians. Jesus Christ died for us all and it is up to us to accept his salvation. The result of limited atonement on our view of salvation is that it leads to predestination and takes away our role in accepting salvation. In accepting this limited view, we become a people elected and predestined by God and salvation becomes God’s choice and not our own.

However, with the view of general atonement, Jesus Christ has done it all for us and has freely gifted us salvation. It is now our choice to accept his gift and to receive salvation. Therefore, believing in the historical view of general atonement means that God has atoned us all and it is up to as to accept his gift of salvation.

Christian theories of atonement have been commonly categorized into two groups by theologians and scholars; subjective and objective. Though these categories are arguable, as Olsen calls them misleading and artificial because all of these theories can be both, for the sake of this essay we will use these categories to define the five major theories that have risen over the ages.

The subjective theories emphasise the effect of the cross and atonement on the believers and their response. This means that an emphasis on Christ’s death on the cross and it being an example for/influence on humanity is classed as subjective theories. Objective theories put stress on what the atonement achieved at the event of the cross, outside individuals. This means that any view that sees Jesus’ crucifixion as payment by God for our sins is classed as an objective theory.

The first theory I will be looking at is the Ransom theory. The ransom theory is one of the earliest theories of atonement that originated with Origen of Alexandria. This view orientated from Mark 10: 24 and Matthew 20: 28, where it states that the Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many.

This word ransom was a familiar one for the early Church as it bring up Old Testament imagery as it was a word use of God’s rescue of Israel from Egypt. This theory states that Christ’s death on the cross was a necessary act as a payment to Satan for our release. Due to Adam’s sin, we were captured legally by Satan through the bonds of original sin. Therefore, in order to secure our freedom justly, a price needed to be paid to Satan.

Thus Jesus died on the cross to be that payment. Gregory of Nyssa explains this theory in terms of God fishing for humanity using Jesus’ humanity as bait. This view creates a dualism where it places Satan on the same field as God as He is bargaining with the Devil. It also creates false images of God as he deceives Satan, as Satan could not hold Christ down. This view corrupts the foundation of salvation as our saving is based on lies and deceit.

The second theory is the satisfaction theory. Anselm of Canterbury wanted to replace the ransom theory with a theory that he believed was more rationally intelligible and more biblically faithful. He used the example of a feudal contract based on honour. When a peasant dishonoured his king, he owed his king satisfaction for affront caused to him. Since humans could not pay the satisfaction that is deserved by God, Jesus paid the satisfaction through his death.

However, Jesus had to pay this satisfaction as a man, as man owed the satisfaction, and as God, as only God could pay the needed satisfaction. Therefore, Jesus’ crucifixion was a substitutionary payment paid by Christ to God. Though some see this theory as portraying God as bloodthirsty, Anselm credits this to God’s love, mercy and compassion. Through Christ’s death, God is satisfied, his wrath is satisfied and the penalty of death is satisfied.

This means that we are atoned and it is up to us now to take part in the restored relationship with God. This objective theory places great emphasis on the death of Christ and salvation becomes a free gift for us to accept. This theory also emphasises the need for the incarnation in salvation. God had to be both human and divine in order for us to be atoned and saved. Holding this theory of atonement highlights the aspects of love, mercy and compassion that is present in the theology of salvation.

The third theory is moral influence. This theory was Peter Abelard’s response to satisfaction. Moral influence theory claims that God does not need a payment for a deserving penalty but he wants people to repent from their sin.

The redemptive work of Christ was to be a moral influence rather than a payment. The life of Christ and his death of the cross are seen as a sign of God’s love. This great love is what challenges and changes sinners to repent and draw nearer to God.

This subjective theory has a massive impact on our theology of salvation. Rather than salvation being God saving us from the wages of sin and a free gift for us to accept, salvation becomes a sign of God’s love that transforms us morally so that we may repent and live a life the is morally pleasing to God.

The fourth theory is the Christus Victor model. This view arises from the work of Luther who emphasised the themes of battle in the New Testament. This theory became more widely known through the writings of Gustaf Aulen.

Aulen describes Christus Victor as, “ the idea of atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ -Christus Victor – fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the tyrants under which mankind is in bondage and suffering.” This theory follows the same thoughts as the ransom theory, as it is due to Adam’s sin that Satan is holding us all captive.

The major theological issue that is addressed by this theory is not how a sinner’s wages of sin can be paid so that they may be righteous before God, but rather how can we be set free from the oppressive and destructive forces of the world. Jesus, during the time after his death and before his resurrection, went into hell to battle Satan and to set all the captives of sin free. He fought and returned victorious over the powers of evil in this world.

This theory completely changes the reason for Christ’s death and crucifixion in the theology of salvation. Rather than dying as a payment for the wages of sin, this theory suggests that Jesus died on the cross so that he may enter the enemy’s territory and wage a war to set all the captives free. This theory does not deal with consequences of sin and does not deal with human guilt and response.

The final theory I will be looking at is the penal substitution theory. This theory is probably the most well-known and widely held by Protestants who have been influenced by Calvin as this is his theory of atonement. Calvin uses the analogy of a law courtroom where humans are being judged guilty for their sins and are sentenced to death.

The main issues here is the need for satisfying God’s justice. It is here that God’s shows us his love by sending Jesus as a substitute to take our place at death. Through Christ death, God’s justice is satisfied as punishment for sin is paid. It is then through his resurrection that Jesus offers us salvation to those who are willing to receive it.

This theory highlights both the love of God for us, as well as his righteous anger towards sin. Both of these things needed to be reconciled and are done so through Christ’s death and resurrection. His anger is appeased through the Christ’s death as well as his love being expressed through the same act. Through this theory, the imputing of Christ righteousness is made aware in the theology of salvation, just as our sins were imputed into Christ during his crucifixion.

The reason for atonement is so that we may once again partake in communion and relationship with God, which was broken due to sin. The theology of atonement looks at how God went about accomplishing this atonement through his saving work.

Through this essay we have looked at the extent of atonement and the implication it has on our theology of salvation. Whether Christ atones us all or just the elect changes our role in salvation. The extent of atonement can define whether salvation is a free gift from God or predestined saving.

As there is no uniting view of atonement, many different theories of atonement have risen and have been commonly categorized into subjective and objective theories. Subjective theories emphasize the role of the cross in salvation, while objective theories emphasize what is achieved at the cross in salvation. The subjective theory of moral influence emphasises the aspect of the love of God. It makes salvation a sign of God’s love through his example and his love compels us to repent and live a moral life.

This theories implies that it is up to us, through the example of Christ, to live a moral life as his love transforms us morally. The objective theories of ransom, satisfaction, Christus Victor and penal substitution emphasise the event that took place at the cross and what was achieved through it.

They all show that a wage for sin is paid through Christ’s death and resurrection. However, they all emphasize and place importance on different aspect of the theology of salvation. For example satisfaction theory highlights the importance of Jesus’ humanity and divinity while penal substitution addresses the issue of righteousness that is imputed to us though Jesus’ taking on our sins.

It is clear to see that one’s theology of atonement plays a role in one’s theology of salvation. Through the different aspects of salvation being emphasized by different theories and by answering the theological question of ‘ how we are saved’, our understanding of atonement directs affects our understanding of salvation. Bibliography

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