

Images of the Atonement

Assumptions:

From the New Testament writings on, atonement has been basic to Christian belief:

In Jesus Christ, believers experienced reconciliation with God.

The early church councils did not affirm any one understanding of the atonement.

No one theory of the atonement is adequate; each has strengths and weaknesses.

Each understanding of the atonement is best understood within its cultural context.

Sacrifice

Cultural context: Hebrew sacrificial system; sacrifice in Greco-Roman religions;
sacrifice = an offering to God

Affirmation: The incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus is an offering to God. By participating in this “paschal mystery” we experience reconciliation with God in and through Christ who is victor over sin and death.

Strength: Reconciliation is costly—it involves the whole of life, both for Jesus and for us.

Weakness: When separated from a Hebraic sacrificial understanding, emphasis shifts from the whole Christ event as sacrifice to a focus only the crucifixion with emphasis on Jesus’ suffering. If God is understood as demanding this suffering/sacrifice, our understanding of God as good and loving is threatened.

Ransom

Cultural context: slaves could be ransomed or redeemed and thus liberated

Affirmation: Jesus ransoms, redeems, liberates us from the power of sin and death; we are given the freedom to be children of God.

Strength: When the focus is on those being ransomed or redeemed, the gift of liberation comes as amazing grace, a release from the powers that enslave us.

Weakness: When the focus is on who the ransom is paid to, problems arise. Does Satan have the power to determine the terms of the ransom? Since God is not the source of our bondage, could not God free us without a ransom being paid? Neither alternative seems acceptable.

Satisfaction

Cultural context: medieval feudal honor system; dishonor must be “satisfied” or the social fabric breaks down.

Affirmation: God is honored by our faithful living. When we are not faithful, God is dishonored. There is no way for us to gain “extra credit” with which to satisfy God’s honor. Even if we lived in continual faithfulness, it would be what we ought to do anyway. Christ became human and lived in complete faithfulness in honoring God. In and through him, we are justified by grace, sharing in his faithfulness.

Strength: God is honored by faithful living. Jesus is faithful. In him we are counted faithful.

Weakness: God is seen as demanding honor; Christ as placating that demand. The unity of the Trinity can be seriously compromised as a result.

Substitution

- Cultural context: development of laws rather than a power figure who dispenses justice; punishment follows breaking the law or the social fabric breaks down
- Affirmation: God's justice takes seriously our sins which break our relationship with God and each other.. We have no "extra credit" with which to make payment for our sins. Jesus stands in our place, paying the penalty we cannot pay.
- Strength: Jesus stands with us and for us in our sin and alienation. His love reaches out to us in our sin and is willing to give his life and death on our behalf.
- Weakness: God can be seen as an abusive parent, demanding a "blood sacrifice"--the tortured death of his Son as payment for our sins. Love can be absent from the image.
- Note: Post-reformation Protestantism has tended to focus on this image to the exclusion of other images.

Transforming Love

- Cultural context: early age of chivalry—love as source of identity and mission; 19th century liberalism---role of feeling; importance of the interpersonal
- Affirmation: God's love transforms us. We respond not out of fear but out of love. We do not want to hurt God who loves us so much that the Word was made flesh to live a life of love among us, receiving the hostility and persecution of forces threatened by such love, but loving unto death.
- Strength: The transforming power of God's love is recognized and celebrated. Reconciliation is a new way of seeing. In Jesus, the depth and extent of God's love is revealed. We can accept that we are accepted, and freed to live transformed and transforming lives.
- Weakness: It is possible for this love to be misinterpreted as "cheap grace"—not recognizing the demands of discipleship or the cost of reconciliation. Love's "moral influence" (as this view has often been called) may not be enough for some persons to experience transformation. Inability to respond with love to God's love may result in a feeling of hopelessness.