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Just Why, Exactly, Did Christ Die on the Cross?
The True Nature of the Atonement

Why did Jesus Christ die on the cross? Was his suffering and death planned by God for a purpose, or just a circumstance of his ministry? How does Jesus' death on the cross effect us as Christians? Does it matter why he died on the cross? Is it important to our faith?

These questions deal with the purpose of what Jesus Christ did on the cross, as chronicled in the Bible, and how it relates to God and man. They deal with the nature of the atonement, how Christ made amends for mankind's broken relationship with God. But just what, exactly, is the true nature of the atonement, and why is it important for us to understand? This paper will address that important question.

Having an incorrect understanding of the biblically expressed nature and purpose of Christ's atoning work on the cross jeopardizes a true faith in God's salvific plan for us to enjoy eternal life and fellowship with him. It is vital for a believer to understand the true nature of the atonement as God intended and revealed in the Bible, and as is correctly expressed in the historical, orthodox view. To demonstrate this, we'll take a look at several defective views from history that do not stand in light of Scripture. Identifying what these views improperly focus on will help us see the intense need for a true understanding of Christ's work on the cross, while also importing the depth and magnitude of his multitudinous accomplishments on our behalf.

DEFECTIVE VIEWS OF THE ATONEMENT:

Philosophers and theologians developed defective views of the atonement throughout history as they imposed their prejudices on what Christ was doing on the cross without a balanced interpretation from Scripture. As we look at each view, notice how they lack a thorough, biblical assessment.

The Classical View

The first defective view of the atonement is referred to as the Classical View, or the Ransom View as Millard Erickson describes it, or the Patristical Theory according to Charles Hodge. First prompted by Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa and Jerome, and later resumed in an altered way by Gustav

Aulen, the Classical View taught that Satan owned mankind in its fallen state, and that Christ ransomed and delivered us from his control by substituting himself for us as a payment specifically to Satan. In this view, God had to pay a price to Satan to buy us back from slavery, and, according to Origen, Satan was the one who demanded Christ's blood to make that payment, not God.

The Classical View emphasizes the victory over Satan and deliverance of humankind from bondage to him. Scripture does speak about Christ's work on the cross as a ransom for us. Jesus says of himself in Matthew 20:28: "...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life *as a ransom* for many." Paul also qualifies Christ's death as a payment for us in 1 Corinthians 6:20: "...you were *bought at a price*. Therefore honor God with your body." Clearly, the Bible does speak about a payment being made for us, Christ's blood as a ransom on our behalf. It also speaks about saving us from the devil and destroying his power over us, as the author of Hebrews writes in chapter two, verses 14 and 15: "...by his [Jesus'] death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

The problem, however, is that Scripture nowhere states that the ransom of Christ's blood was a payment *to Satan*. This Classical View stresses the power of evil while overlooking the significance of the guilt of our sin and the wrath and power of God. This view does not direct Christ's work toward God or man, but the devil. But Jesus' cross work was not directed toward some demand from Satan, but to satisfy God's just demand for punishment of our sin against him. Satan is only able to inflict penalty and torment towards man for his sin, and only what God allows. The Christian can rejoice in the wonderful fact that we are saved from Satan's dominion over our lives as a tormentor and punisher, "For he [Jesus] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13,14).

The Moral Influence View

The Moral Influence View is the second defective view of the atonement to discuss. It describes Christ's death as merely a demonstration of God's love for us. First developed by Peter Abelard and made popular in the U.S. by Horace Bushnell in the 1800's, the Moral Influence View depicts man's attitudes of fear and pain as what keep him apart from God, rather than sin. Through Christ's death, God feels our

pain, earns our love and trust, and thereby corrects man's fear and ignorance of him. The atonement here is viewed as God healing our souls and restoring our faith in him, and thus our relationship with him.

God's nature is emphasized as love, and Christ's dying on the cross was the extreme expression of himself to us so we no longer fear him. According to Hodge, this view "attributes all the efficacy of his [Christ's] work to the moral effect produced on the hearts of men by his character, teachings, and acts..." and that "men simply cease to be sinners when they follow Christ" (566-7).

There are many Scripture references that speak of God's love for us in reference to Christ's atoning cross work, such as 1 John 4:8: "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." This demonstrates that part of God's nature is love. However, notice verse 10 that follows: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as *an atoning sacrifice for our sins*." This verse does show that God sent his Son Jesus for us because he loved us, but the last part of the verse reveals the reason Christ died on the cross, for our sins. Our sins are what keep us from God, and *because* he loved us, he sent his Son in our place to meet his demands for justice that we can not satisfy on our own.

It is extremely important to understand that God's motivation for sending Jesus to the cross was his love for us. God really does love us - so much that he came to die for us and save us from our sins so that we can be with him. This demonstrates love and moves us to love him and accept his forgiveness. But if we don't believe that Christ came to save us from our sins, we are deathly mistaken in our understanding of God's love. If God is love, why would he put his Son through such meaningless torment if it weren't absolutely necessary to save us? He wouldn't. God is also just, and that is the problem with the Moral Influence View. It minimizes justice, our sin, God's holiness and thus the depth of the love that motivated Christ's sacrifice. It essentially teaches that man can save himself.

The Governmental View

Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) was the major advocate of the Governmental View of the atonement. His thinking was that if sin is left unpunished people won't take God's moral law seriously and continue to violate it. His view paints God as merely an arbitrator or governor of law. He must uphold the law and impress the importance of keeping it, so Christ was sent to be punished as an exhibition of God's displeasure with man's sin. This spectacle of extreme punishment carried out on Christ was to turn us

away from sinning. And once we stop, we are forgiven and there is no need for further punishment. In this view, Christ's substitutionary death for a penalty provides the framework for forgiveness and the way for God to maintain the structure of moral government.

This view has some merit in that it emphasizes the seriousness of our sin, how much God hates it and how much it goes against his moral laws:

“It pleased the Lord for the sake of his righteousness to make his law great and glorious...Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned? For they would not follow his ways; they did not obey his law. So he poured out on them his burning anger, the violence of war. It enveloped them in flames, yet they did not understand; it consumed them, but they did not take it to heart.” (Isaiah 42:21, 24-24)

This verse certainly conveys God's law as holy and important, and that our disobedience warrants severe punishment, but it also shows *that our sin is directly against God himself*. He takes it personally because his law emanates from his holy nature. This is where the governmental view is at fault, as, according to Hodge, God is not depicted as an offended master, but only as a moral governor. Hodge also notes that the end of this punishment is the prevention of crime and the preservation of order. Christ's punishment saves man in the sense that it turns him from sin, but it doesn't pay for his sin to satisfy God's justice. This is a problem, because it essentially teaches that man saves himself in turning from sin thanks to the deterrent of Christ's example of punishment on the cross. But, as Hodge rightly points out, “the whole moral effect of punishment lies in its being just” (575). But how is it just for the innocent to be punished? Jesus Christ was without sin and deserved no punishment. If the innocent are punished too, why should sinners stop sinning? This minimizes Christ's sacrifice and efficacious work, as well as God's personal, holy wrath and man's total inability to keep God's law, even if he wants to.

The Mystical View

Another defective view of the atonement is the Mystical View, in which humanity is considered holistically redeemed by Christ through the incarnation. In this view, proposed by McLeod Campbell, Christ is somehow seen as taking union with the whole of humanity, making them immortal, and redeeming

them through that union, making the human race, or the church, the God-man. Humanity is deified by Christ's essence unifying God and man, thus bridging the gap between them. Hodge refers to this theory as the "...design of Christ's work as the production of a subjective effect in the sinner. It produces a change in him" (581). This mystical view of a union between humanity and God through Christ is also said to be through Christ's death. In a sense, we need to get back to God, but it's hard, because repentance is almost like death and we need God's help to do it. So, God relates to the experience of death through Christ's death on the cross, and we thus are somehow united with him in his experience. Our separation from God is bridged by our similar experience and point of union through the agent of his Son assuming our humanity and experiencing death.

The Bible does emphasize a union of Christ with his saved creation. In fact, the phrase "in Christ" in relation to believers is used over 175 times in Pauline epistles alone. And many analogies speak of a union with Christ. In John 15:5, Jesus says "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit: apart from me you can do nothing." Clearly, a union between Christ and believers is imported, but it is more in the sense of being united and abiding together with an emphasis on the church relying on Christ for its life, rather than some kind of mystical absorption, confusion or change.

While union with Christ is a mysterious, beautiful relationship that the believer enjoys, and this union is what envelopes all the salvific doctrines, the Bible maintains a distinction between the church and Christ, it does not blend them together as one entity as the Mystical View does. The problem with the Mystical View is that, as Hodge puts it, it teaches that "Christ redeems us by what he is, not by what he does" (581). Christ was able to redeem us *because* of who he is, but he redeemed us *by* his work on the cross as a substitution for our sins. We weren't taken up in Christ's essence, we were saved by his sacrificial payment. The Mystical View neglects the personal and distinct relationship between God, Christ and his saved elect, only seeing an impersonal blending of the different natures into one mystical union without any account of removing man's imperfections to make any kind of union with a holy God possible.

The Socinian View

The last defective view to look at is the Socinian View, which Millard Erickson describes in *Christian Theology* (783). He sights Faustus and Laelius Socinus as the developers of this theory in the 16th century, which is represented by Unitarians today. According to this view, the atonement was an example of Christ's dedication to and love for God. His life and death on the cross was the ultimate demonstration of what we should be prepared to do to display our love and devotion for God to fully experience salvation. It emphasizes Christ as human, and focuses on his prophetic and kingly offices in a heavenly role while ignoring his priestly office in expiating our sins. It views man as able to accomplish his own salvation by following Christ.

Scripture does command us to follow Christ in obedience and work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12), but it is *because* he has saved us, not to accomplish our salvation. Jesus tells us that if we are to follow him, we must die to ourselves and take up our cross to do so (Matthew 16:24). And 1 Peter 2:21 speaks much about how we should demonstrate our love to God: "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." But following his steps is only possible because Christ was perfect and paid the penalty of our sin for us on the cross. In fact, the following verse 24 demonstrates that Christ's death was first a sacrifice for our sins that enables us to live in righteousness: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."

Romans 3:23-25 sums up our situation as sinners who cannot live righteously by following Christ's example. His righteousness must be imputed to us by his sacrifice for our sins so we are able to follow him, "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood." This is the true nature of the atonement. The problem with the Socinian View is that it thinks humanity is spiritually and morally capable of fulfilling God's expectations. But if this were so, we simply would love God completely, and Christ's death would not have been necessary.

DIMENSIONS OF TRUTH IN THE DEFECTIVE THEORIES:

Each of the aforementioned views is defective in that they do not focus on the true nature of the atonement, and emphasize a dimension of the atonement that should be appreciated, but is not the purpose of Christ's work on the cross. Each emphasis does, however, import how amazing Christ's cross work was, and portrays its many accomplishments. Erickson highlights significant dimensions of truth in the work of Christ's atonement from these theories. He notes that in death, Christ: 1) gave us a perfect example of the type of dedication God desires of us; 2) demonstrated the great extent of God's love; 3) underscored the seriousness of sin and the severity of God's righteousness; and 4) triumphed over the forces of sin and death, liberating us from their power. "All of these we humans needed, and Christ did them all" (816).

These are all things we need, and Christ did do them all on the cross, but they are not the true nature of why Christ died on the cross. The true nature of the atonement has been spoken of quite a bit while addressing the lack of it in each defective view, that is, a substitutionary, vicarious, penal sacrifice to reconcile God to man, and redeem man so he can enjoy eternal fellowship with God.

THE TRUE, ORTHODOX NATURE OF THE ATONEMENT:

The importance of understanding the orthodox view of the atonement should be evident after seeing how each defective view lacks scriptural truth. In most of the cases, it may often be due to a lack of correct doctrine with other background factors of the atonement, as laid out by Erickson. Before we go further into the true nature of the atonement, it is important to briefly address and define these vital background factors. They are: 1) The *nature of God* is perfect and complete holiness, and sin is contrary and thus repulsive to his nature; 2) the *status of law* is an expression of God's person and will, a transcript of his nature and essence (ex. do not lie because God is truth), so sin renders punishment inevitably as it is an offense to a personal God; 3) total depravity is the *human condition*, as we are utterly unable to do anything to save ourselves from our condition of sinfulness, so an atonement had to be made by someone else on humanity's behalf; 4) *Christ* is both God - eternal, preexistent, and sinless; and human - which qualifies his atoning death as applicable to human beings; 5) *the Old Testament sacrificial system* that foreshadowed the work of Jesus Christ necessitated animal blood shedding sacrifices specifically to atone for the people's sin, which inherently deserved punishment, as a substitute for the sinner (818-822).

It is this idea of a substitution for sinners to pay a debt they couldn't, so as to reconcile God to them by the removal of their guilt and God's wrath that summarizes what Christ Jesus did for his chosen people. John Murray states: "Christ redeemed us to God by his blood, he gave himself a ransom that he might deliver us from all iniquity. The atonement is *efficacious substitution*" (75). The atonement is efficacious in that it has the power to produce its purpose, the salvation of God's chosen elect. It is a substitution in that Jesus Christ became our sin for us and vicariously paid the penalty of our sin. The end result is our redemption, justification and restored fellowship with God in his glorious kingdom. And, as Hodge asserts:

It is therefore the plain doctrine of Scripture that... Christ saves us neither by the mere exercise of power, nor by his doctrine, nor by his example, nor by the moral influence which He exerted, nor by any subjective influence on his people, whether natural or mystical, but as a satisfaction to divine justice, as an expiation for sin and as a ransom from the curse and authority of the law, thus reconciling us to God, by making it consistent with his perfections to exercise mercy toward sinners, and then renewing them after his own image, and finally exalting them to all the dignity, excellence, and blessedness of the sons of God. (520)

And he summarizes the Orthodox View in saying:

The two great objects to be accomplished by the work of Christ are, the removal of the curse under which mankind laboured on account of sin, and their restoration to the image and fellowship of God...[the atonement is a] real satisfaction, of infinite, inherent merit, to the vindicatory justice of God; so that He saves his people by doing for them, and in their stead, what they were unable to do for themselves, satisfying the demands of the law in their behalf, and bearing its penalty in their stead; whereby they are reconciled to God, receive the Holy Ghost, and are made partakers of the life of Christ to their present sanctification and eternal salvation...we are cleansed by his blood from guilt, and renewed by his Spirit after the image of God." (563)

Juxtaposing the defective views of the nature of the atonement with the correct, orthodox view demonstrates the necessity for a true understanding of Christ's work if we are to be truly saved. Leon Morris writes: "The atonement is the crucial doctrine of the faith. Unless we are right here it matters little, or so it seems to me, what we are like elsewhere" (5). Hodge confirms this, saying: "It is a historical fact that where false theories of the atonement prevail, Christ and his work are put in the background" (527). And if we don't understand or believe that Jesus Christ came to die on the cross for us as a substitution for our sin, accomplished our redemption, and sealed our eternal security in God's kingdom, than our prayers, thanksgiving, worship and service are all in vain, and we will die in our sins.

STICK WITH SCRIPTURE:

So how is it that so many mistaken and defective views of the atonement have plagued the visible church through history and are still prevalent today? Listen carefully to any message that is defective in the view of Christ's cross work, and you are sure to find a lack of Scripture as the source of the message. Rather, you'll usually encounter an exposition on the speaker's own ideas of what Christ's work is in their view of things. Hodge addresses this deathly misfortune:

No man can be so blind as not to see that all that is peculiar in what the modern theology teaches of the person and work of Christ, is nothing more nor less than the application of modern speculative philosophy to the doctrine of the Bible...we are bound to understand the Scriptures in the plain historical sense, and to admit no philosophy to explain or modify that sense, except the philosophy of the Bible itself; that is those facts and principles concerning the nature of God, the nature of man, of the world, and of the relation between God and the world, which are either asserted or plainly assumed in the Scriptures." (591)

The Bible and only the Bible should dictate our view of Christ Jesus and what he did to save sinners. When the clear, direct Word of God is preached, there is no mistaking Christ's mission on earth, as John Murray concludes of the atonement: "The word of our Lord himself (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45) should place beyond all doubt three facts: (I) that the work he came into the world to accomplish is a work

of ransom, (2) that the giving of his life was the ransom price, and (3) that this ransom was substitutionary in its nature” (43).

And our Lord’s words here do make it clear, if we will only hear, understand, believe and commit to him, that “...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and *to give his life as a ransom for many.*”

And to the Son of Man, the Lamb of God, the living Jesus Christ, be glory and power forever and ever! Amen.

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