

1. An Evangelical Assessment of the Contemporary Theologies of the Atonement

- a. Evangelical
- b. Assessment
- c. Contemporary
- d. Theologies
- e. Atonement

“A term coined by the English Reformer William Tyndale in 1526 to translate the Latin term *reconciliatio*, and often used, especially in nineteenth-century works of theology, to refer to the salvific consequences of the death of Christ. The phrase ‘theories of the atonement’ is often used to refer to ways for understanding the manner in which the salvation of humanity is possible through the life, death and resurrection of Christ.”
The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought (Blackwell), s.v. “Atonement”.

“‘Atonement’ may be defined as God’s work on sinners’ behalf to reconcile them to himself. It is the divine activity that confronts and resolves the problem of human sin so that people may enjoy full fellowship with God both now and in the age to come. While in one sense the meaning of atonement is as broad and diverse as all of God’s saving work throughout time and eternity, in another it is as particular and restricted as the crucifixion of Jesus. For in the final analysis Scripture presents his sacrificial death as the central component of God’s reconciling mercy.”
R. W. Yarbrough (*New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, s.v. “Atonement,” 2001)

2. The Contemporary Relevance of the Doctrine of the Atonement

“What particularly interests you or seems important for a discussion of the atonement?”

“It is no accident that the idea of atonement should be under increasing question in contemporary theology because it fits into a broader range of doctrinal erosion that has already occurred. If the full deity of Christ and a high doctrine of the incarnation are not upheld, it is impossible to have a high doctrine of the atonement. Along with that we’ve seen serious erosion in contemporary understandings of the doctrine of sin. Much of contemporary theology is concerned, and rightly so, with the plight of the victim. But the victim cannot be understood apart from a more central plight and that is the plight of the sinner. A failure to understand the saving significance of Christ’s death is at the heart of our malaise in the contemporary church, especially the Protestant church.”

George Hunsinger, *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought – Dialogue*, “A Discussion of the Atonement: Abuse, Violence, Sacrifice, and the Cross” (February 2009).

The atonement, like many other foundational evangelical doctrines, is being questioned today.

- Is Jesus’ death “divine child abuse,” or is it the unique manner in which God’s wrath is propitiated and humanity’s sin is forgiven?
- Does the biblical evidence reveal a divine necessity to the atonement for the forgiveness of sins, or could sins have been forgiven in some other manner?
- How are biblical metaphors of the death of Christ to be understood? Is there to be a flattening of them all so that it simply addresses broadly the implications of Jesus’ death, or is there a priority to the various metaphors?

- What are the problems if we become reductionist in our understanding of the atonement so that we emphasize only one metaphor at the expense of the others?
- What does it mean to be biblical when understanding the doctrine of the atonement? How is it that the various views on the atonements claim to be biblical while claiming proponents of other positions are not biblical?
- How much is culture and contextual theology to influence our understanding and teaching of the atonement?

Since the atonement is at the heart of understanding Jesus and the gospel, it is an excellent “test-case” of the foundation of evangelical theology: the person and work of Christ, God, humanity, sin and salvation, the Scriptures. Additionally, it is important to return to “first theology” or, more accurately, “first atonement theology” by addressing this essential doctrine through an assessment of the contemporary discussion/debate, by focusing on the biblical and theological teaching, and by applying this truth in the context of life, ministry and the church.

As Evangelicals respond to secular culture, “we defend, philosophically and historically, a faith that ceases to make sense of our condition, a faith that in terms of our subjective perceptions ceases to have face validity or subjective plausibility. With the demise of sin, hell becomes indefensible, grace loses its appeal, mission faces a crisis of legitimacy, and the cross of Christ has no meaning. Such a statement might lead us to despair of any attempt to make the word of the cross either relevant or intelligible to contemporary culture. The problem as Priest sees it is that most attempts at contextualization tend to stray into two related errors: cultural insensitivity, or cultural accommodation.”

Colin Greene, “Is the Message of the Cross Good News for the Twentieth Century?,” in *Atonement Today: A Symposium at St John’s College, Nottingham*, ed. John Goldingay (SPCK, 1995), 222-223.

3. A Few Observations on the Recent Writings on the Atonement (Broad Generalizations,)

a. Most agree that the atonement has been understood by the majority as penal substitution since at least the Reformation.

b. Most are feeling a strong sense of the need to do "contextual" theology, which affects how we understand images and metaphors, violence, post-Christendom.

c. Not many are claiming one view of the atonement exclusively, but rather multiple views either with priority/structure or flat.

d. Most are stating that this has to do with more than Jesus' death, and our forgiveness. It has to do with Jesus' incarnation, life and resurrection, and also our life and mission.

e. The doctrine of God is a major topic, particularly his relationality with his creatures (impassibility, immutability, aseity).

f. Most engage in exegesis and attempt to “disprove” the other person/position by “proving” their own position, by out-exegesis the other. By doing so, they are being “biblical.”

g. Most desire to do away with penal substitution.

- Repudiated (J. Denny Weaver)
- Interpreted afresh (J. I. Packer)
- Reaffirmed (Jeffrey, Ovey and Sach)
- Rebalanced (Hans Boersma)

• Another way to ponder this is the following: is the penal substitutionary view . . .

- Essential and exclusive?
- Essential and central?
- Essential but not central?
- Neither essential nor central?
- Inappropriate?

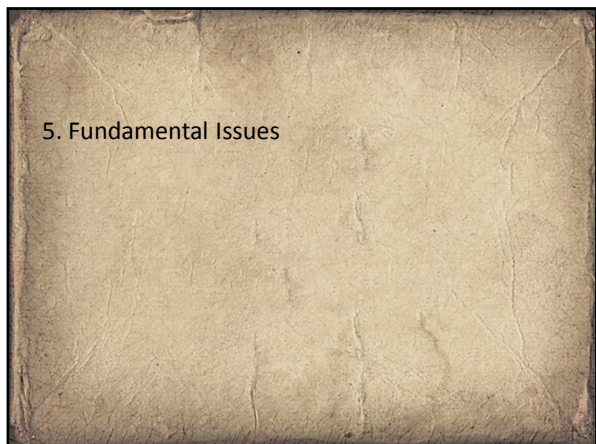
4. Fundamental Questions

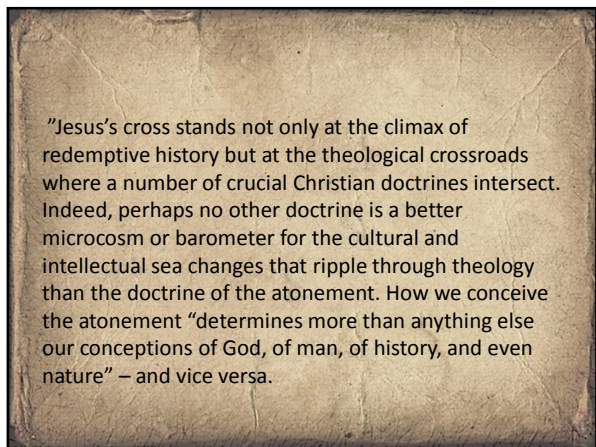
- How is the fundamental problem determined?
- How is that problem addressed or resolved – is it based on the Bible, history, cultural, experience, opinion?

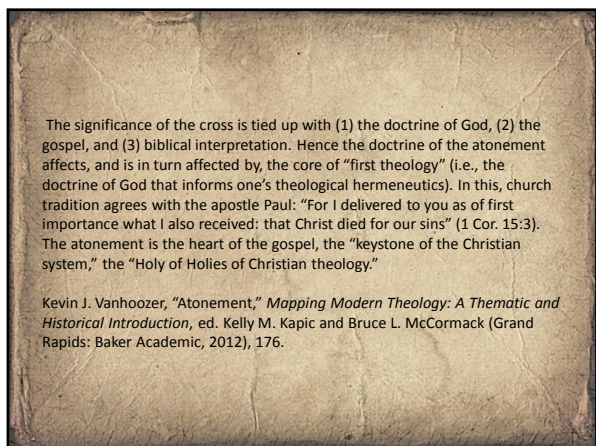
- How authoritative are the images or models, i.e. how closely are they connected to biblical revelation? How does each image or model address the others? Are they mutually exclusive? Is there a central one that explains the others? Are they all equal, so one can pick and choose which one is emphasized? Is that emphasis culturally determined? Are they illustrative or constitutive?
- How is the doctrine of the atonement related to other essential doctrines of the Christian faith, since they are all organically related?

“It is commonplace to observe that there is no dogma of the atonement, that although in Christology there is dogma established at all seven ecumenical councils, no council – or pope or any other plausibly ecumenical authority – has ever laid down a dogma of the atonement. If you deny that Christ is ‘of one being with the Father,’ or that the Son and Jesus are but one hypostasis, you are formally a heretic. But you can deny any explanation of how the atonement works, or all of them together, or even deny that any explanation is possible, and be a perfectly orthodox believer.”

Robert Jenson, “On the Doctrine of the Atonement,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 27, no. 2 (2006), 100.







"Few if any themes are more central to the Bible than atonement. The evidence depends on more than Paul's asseveration to the Corinthians, 'For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2). The sacrificial systems of tabernacle and temple, the significance of Passover and Day of Atonement, the dramatic way in which all four canonical Gospels climax in the cross and resurrection (some wag has said they are all passion narratives with extended introductions), the nuanced arguments of Hebrews, the fact that the Apocalypse depicts the triumph (of all things!) of a slaughtered Lamb, all combine to provide powerful support for the centrality of the theme explored in this volume.

"Even to begin to do justice to this theme one must attempt at least five things: (1) The way the theme of sacrifice and atonement develops in the Bible's storyline must be laid out. (2) Equally, the way this theme is intertwined with related themes (the holiness of God, the nature of sin, what salvation consists of, the promise of what is to come, and much more) must be delineated, along with (3) more probing reflection on a selection of crucial passages. These first three items belong rather tightly to biblical theology. Of course, (4) how these themes have been handled in the history of the church's theology must not be ignored. (5) Equally, if the volume is to speak to our generation, it must engage some of the more important current discussion."

D. A. Carson (writing in the series preface to Graham Cole, *God the Peacemaker: How Atonement Brings Shalom*, pp. 11-12)

- Postmodernism
- Doctrine of God: attributes, Trinity and impassibility
- Scripture/Bible: story, NPP, word-phrase-text-image-metaphor-interpretation-theory-tradition, historical-critical vs. TIS, flatten (reductionism)
- Theology/Doctrine: second-order, content and form, progress, contextual (genitive theologies, i.e. theologies of)

6. Biblical Overview

- Death and the shedding of blood are at the heart of “covering” sin and guilt:
 - Genesis 3:14-24
- The shedding of blood was the basis upon which the firstborn sons of the Israelites were saved, the angel of death “passed over” (Passover):
 - Exodus 12; 1 Corinthians 5:7
- Death and the shedding of blood are at the heart of the temple, the priestly office and the sacrificial system.
 - Exodus 20ff

- Death and the shedding of blood and the scapegoat, i.e. the forgiveness of sins, are at the heart of the Day of Atonement
 - Leviticus 16
- The death/resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the Old Testament promises about the Messiah:
 - Isaiah 53:4-11).
- The death/resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the heart of His incarnation:
 - 1 John 3:8b; cf. Hebrews 2:14-15; cf. also Genesis 3:15).

- The death/resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the heart of His ministry:
 - Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; 1 Peter 3:18
- The death/resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the heart of justification:
 - Romans 3:24-26; cf. Romans 8:3; Galatians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21
- The death/resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the gospel:
 - 1 Corinthians 15:1-5

- The death/resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the heart of worship:
 - Hebrews 10:19-25
- The death/resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the heart of heaven:
 - Revelation 5:6-14; 22:1-5

Study of the atonement is never intended to be done coolly and abstractly, but fully engaged in worship for the purpose of worship.

We have to get somehow from *mandata Dei* [the commandments of God] to *Deus mandans* [the commanding God] if our study of Christian doctrine is to mean anything vital. We want a living synthesis where those very facts, which the intellect dissects and coldly examines, are given back to us with the wholeness which belongs to life . . . Instead of putting off our shoes from our feet because the place whereon we stand is holy ground, we are taking nice photographs of the burning Bush, from suitable angles; we are chatting about theories of Atonement with our feet on the mantelpiece, instead of kneeling down before the wounds of Christ.

J. S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine* (London: Fontana, 1957), 146.

William Haslam's conversion provides an apt illustration of this. While he was preaching on the atonement he realized for the first time the truth and the weight of what he was preaching. He stopped in the midst of his sermon, knelt down and worshipped Christ. Those present exclaimed, "The Parson is converted! The Parson is converted! Hallelujah!"

C. Wright, *Haslam's Journey* (Godalming, Surrey: Highland, 2005).

All of these biblical truths are summarized in the EFCA Statement of Faith in the following way:

5. *The Work of Christ*: We believe that Jesus Christ, as our representative and substitute, shed His blood on the cross as the perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins. His atoning death and victorious resurrection constitute the only ground for salvation.
