

ATONEMENT IN HIGH DEFINITION

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February 18, 2012

Carol had discovered that her husband had been carrying on an affair with another member of their church's congregation for several years. Only by chance had she uncovered this, or who knows, it may well have still been going on to this day. The fallout, however, was enormous. The children were devastated and Carol ended up on tranquilizers to help her cope with the depression. Family and friends were torn apart trying to support both her and her husband, and the impact on the church lasted for months as they tried to come to terms with the breakdown of a relationship they believed to have been one of the strongest in their community.

Carol took legal advice and filed for divorce on the grounds of adultery so she could begin to build a new life for herself and the children. But as the initial shock and pain began to subside, she realized that her love for her husband was still overwhelming. The question she began to wrestle with was how she could win him back and rebuild the relationship that the affair had torn to shreds. There didn't seem to be any sign that her husband was willing to ask for forgiveness and return to her of his own accord. But why should she make all the effort? After all, she was the innocent person in all this, and she had never wanted the relationship to end.

With the divorce settlement agreed and become final, Carol decided she wanted to make one last effort to salvage her marriage. In an act of love, greater than any she had shown before, she wrote to her estranged husband explaining that she didn't blame him for their divorce. She further explained that she was willing to forget all the pain and suffering he had caused her if he could find it in his heart to give their marriage another chance.

There is a saying that hell has no fury like a woman scorned. But if Carol had stuck to her guns and finalized the divorce proceedings, despite the fact that she was perfectly justified in doing so, she would never have achieved a restored, healed, strong, honest and fulfilling marriage. Carol absorbed all the pain and suffering caused by her husband's betrayal in order to salvage something she believed was worth saving. And that's precisely what Jesus did when He suffered on the cross—He absorbed all the pain, all the suffering caused by the breakdown in our fellowship with God and in doing so demonstrated the lengths to which a God who is love will go to restore it.

John's Gospel famously declares, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16). How then, have we come to believe that at the cross this God of love suddenly decides to vent his anger and wrath on His own Son?

Someone has said: "One is surely bound to affirm that the actions of believers are usually the acting out of foundational beliefs, whether in conscious or unconscious ways. The foundational beliefs of a religious faith will find expression, one way or the

other, in the deeds and deportment of its membership.”

What we believe is indissolubly linked to the way we behave. That hypocrisy is rampant is readily acknowledged—there is a huge aspirational gap between our desires and our delivery. Our foundational beliefs filter into our responses. Our values have consequences for both our attitudes and actions. What we believe about the cross (and what God was doing there) will fundamentally shape our attitude toward, and involvement with, wider society. Inadequate doctrines of atonement lead to distorted understandings of God and humanity and result in an immature engagement in community and wider society.

Is there any connection between the public’s almost universal perception of certain elements of the church as judgmental, guilt-inducing, censorious, finger-wagging, bigoted, and self-righteous and aspects of its theology of the cross? Why is it that our culture now views the death of Christ as no more than some kind of ancient myth or irrelevant religious event? Perhaps one factor is that our thinking about the cross has become distorted and thus our presentation of it is inadequate to engage the hearts and minds of our contemporaries both within and beyond the church.

Do we believe that Christ’s death on the cross has any relevance or significance beyond the individual eternal destiny of His followers? What does the atonement mean for the wider affairs of our communities? What direction can our understanding of the atonement offer as we think

about the global challenges faced by humanity at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Does the atonement speak to our government? the future of the Middle East, the economic survival of families. Does it address the hopes, ambitions and fears of our generation?

Undoubtedly, a weakness of some modern views of the atonement has been that they have simply failed to speak to, engage with, or challenge our culture in any significant way. The penal substitutionary theory of atonement has failed us in exactly this way.

The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing His Son for an offense He has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. John Calvin’s legal mind, argued that a righteous God is angry with sinners and demands justice. God’s wrath can be appeased only through bringing about the violent death of His Son. “In pagan Greek thought gods often became angry with men, but their anger could be placated and the good will of the gods obtained by some kind of propitiatory sacrifice. Even in the Old Testament, the idea of atonement as the propitiating of an angry deity and transmuting His anger into benevolence is not to be found.”¹

The greatest problem with penal substitution is that it presents us with a God who is first and

¹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*.

foremost concerned with retribution for sin that flows from His wrath against sinners. The only way for His anger to be placated is in receiving recompense from those who have wronged Him, and although His great love motivates Him to send His Son, His wrath remains the driving force behind the need for the cross. The whole gospel is reduced to a single sentence: “God is no longer angry with us because Jesus died in our place.”

But let Jesus speak for Himself. It is difficult to see how penal substitution fits with the words or attitude of Jesus. For instance, if God needed a sacrifice to placate His anger, how could Jesus forgive sins before His sacrifice had been made?

It is interesting to note that in Jesus’ own explanation of His Father’s relationship with mankind, the story of the prodigal son, the father is not presented as angry or vengeful or as seeking justice and retribution; instead, he simply runs to greet his wayward child, showers him with gifts and welcomes him home (Luke 15:11-32). The father in the parable is wronged, but he chooses to forgive in order to restore a broken relationship—there is no theme of retribution. Instead, the story is one of outstanding grace, of scandalous love and mercy. How different it would read if penal substitution were the model of atonement offered.

Jesus’ teaching on anger (Matt. 5:22) and retaliation (Matt. 5:48-42) is clear. Is it not strange for Jesus on the one hand to teach “do not return evil for evil” while still looking for retribution himself? Similarly, would it not be inconsistent for God to warn us to love our enemies when He obviously

could not quite bring Himself to do the same without demanding massive appeasement? If these things are true, what does it mean to “be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48)? If it is true that Jesus is “the Word of God,” then how can His message be inconsistent with His nature? If the cross has anything to do with penal substitution then Jesus’ teaching becomes a divine case of “do as I say, not as I do.” I, for one, believe that God practices what He preaches. If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by His Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.

Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

The cross is not a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father punishing His Son for an offence He did not commit. Rather than a symbol of vengeance or retribution, the cross of Christ is the greatest statement of love and demonstration of just how far God the Father and Jesus His Son are prepared to go to prove that love and to bring redemption to sinners. The truth is, the cross is a symbol of love. It is a demonstration of just how far God as Father and Jesus as His Son are prepared to go to prove that love. The cross is a vivid statement of the power of love.

“All heaven suffered in Christ’s agony; but that suffering did not begin or end with His manifestation in humanity. The cross is a revelation to our dull

senses of the pain that, from its very inception, sin has brought to the heart of God.” *Education*, p. 263.

“The atonement of Christ was not made in order to induce God to love those whom He otherwise hated; it was not made to produce a love that was not in existence; but it was made as a manifestation of the love that was already in God’s heart . . . We are not to entertain the idea that God loves us because Christ has died for us . . . The death of Christ was expedient in order that mercy might reach us with its full pardoning power, and at the same time that justice might be satisfied in the righteous substitute.” (*Signs of the Times*, May 30, 1895.)

Satan was once the bright and shining light, the Lucifer, of all the heavenly angels. But he became proud and wanted to take the place of God; that meant he really wanted to kill God so he could be “God” instead. He reached the height of his ambition when he inspired the leaders of the then-true “church” to reject and murder their true Christ, Jesus of Nazareth.

Well, not yet the ultimate height of his true ambition. Paul says that he wants to squirm his way into that true church, the one of which Jesus said “I will build My church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). Paul explains what’s happening: it’s a massive deception that has worked to deceive millions of sincere people: Satan “opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God” (2 Thess. 2:3, 4).

Wherever this Enemy spots a church that professes to “keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 12:17) he wants to squirm his way in, to corrupt and deceive. He wants to go to the top.

One example is the popular idea of “the moral influence theory.” It teaches a popular idea of God’s love that undermines obedience to God’s law. It is a lawless gospel. It distorts the purest truth in proclaiming Christ and Him crucified.

Let’s begin with the pure truth: “The love [*agape*] of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge, that if One died for all, then were all dead,” that is, all would be dead if He hadn’t died for “all,” or, if One died for “all,” then that means that “all died” when He died. Either way, the sacrifice of Christ on His cross affects every human on this fallen planet (cf. 2 Cor. 5:14, 15, KJV).

Those who permit their sinful hearts to be moved or motivated by His love “henceforth” are transformed from within: it’s now impossible for them to go on living “unto themselves,” but now they are motivated to live for the One who died for them. (These are people preparing to meet the Lord Jesus when He returns.) They believe in keeping all the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus but in New Covenant realism, not from fear of punishment or hope of reward, but motivated by His love (*agape*).

Even this powerful truth the fallen Lucifer would like to distort—“the moral influence theory.” Yes, he wants to go to the top and poison the pure gospel at its Source.

A wise writer said long ago that when Christ approaches, He walks on a path of velvet lest His footsteps awaken fears when only the message of His love can motivate truly.

We are at present in a little “tarrying time” when each of us is being tested to see how deep and thorough is our heart-appreciation of that much more abounding grace of Christ. Nothing short of that will enable any of us to endure the trials that all of us know will surely come before the end. In the time of the great cosmic Day of Atonement, God’s people must have a far clearer understanding of the gospel than any previous generation have ever been able to comprehend. This does not mean that God has withheld from previous generations that clearer understanding—He has never withheld it from anyone. The truth is simply that no previous generation were ever able to comprehend it.

It’s good news that the Lord will “send [us] Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.” The time specified means that it will be very close to the end of human history. Obviously, his coming is simultaneous with the closing work of Christ as High Priest in His Most Holy apartment ministry, which is that of the cosmic Day of Atonement. What makes the “news” so good is that Elijah will “turn hearts” in atonement (reconciliation; Mal. 4:5, 6).

Human hearts are the most difficult things to “turn” in the entire universe of God. It took the infinite sacrifice of the Son of God to “turn” even one (mine). “Elijah’s” work will be on a grand scale, obviously identical with that of the great “another

angel” of Revelation 18:1-4, whose message “lightens the earth with glory.” Hearts of “fathers” and “children” will be “turned,” impossible to do unless at the same time “hearts” of husbands and wives are “turned” also. Divorce-alienations are the most challenging problems “Elijah” must face.

The miracle required is an undoing of Lucifer’s original rebellion in heaven, of Adam and Eve’s disobedience in the Garden, of the hatred of the scribes and Pharisees against Christ at His crucifixion. The miracle of those heart-reconciliations will be the final demonstration that Christ did not die in vain (cf. Gal. 2:21).

Elie Wiesel, winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize wrote the book *Night*, describing his imprisonment in the Nazi camp of Birkenau, “reception center” for the concentration camp at Auschwitz. In it, Wiesel remembers many prisoners being executed, but none had more impact on him than the hanging of a young boy.

Inmates were divided into camps, and this “sad-eyed angel” had been a servant of one camp leader, who was trusted by the Germans. When he was found to have blown up the local power station, the leader was tortured and transferred to another camp. The boy was also tortured but then sentenced to hang alongside two adults. The rest of the inmates were forced to watch the execution, powerless to help.

As the three prisoners stood on the gallows, waiting to be executed, Wiesel heard a voice behind him ask, “Where is God? Where is He?”

“Long live liberty!” the two adults cried out, in defiance of their execution. The child said nothing. The signal was given and the three were hanged. The adults died instantly, but the boy was too light, and as a result, it took more than half an hour for him to die. During this time, all the other inmates were forced to march past and look at the executed men. As he passed the boy, still barely alive, Wiesel heard the same voice behind him ask, “Where is God now?”

You might have expected Wiesel, who had come to doubt God’s love and justice, to have posed the same question. Yet as he recalls, “I heard a voice within me answer him: ‘Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows.’”

God seems to be conspicuous by His absence as Jesus draws His last breath. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46) are hardly the words of a victorious Messiah. Jesus, the Son of God, dies apparently forsaken and forgotten by His Father. But then the crucifixion of Jesus is an event full of paradox.

The usual solution to this problem of Jesus’ cry is to suggest that God purposely turns His back on Jesus because He cannot bear to look on sin. As Jesus take on to Himself the fullness of the world’s sin, His sight becomes unbearable for a pure and holy God. The problem with this, however, is that if God is omnipresent, as the Bible clearly teaches, He cannot exclude or remove Himself from His creation but must look upon sin every day.

In truth, Jesus’ cry of abandonment mirrors those of countless millions of people who suffer

oppression, enslavement, abuse, disease, poverty, starvation and violence: If God is really love, then where is He? Why Has He abandoned me? Why do I feel so alone? However, while suffering may cause us to believe that God has abandoned us, the reality is that He is always right there with us, in the suffering. The truth is, Jesus was born into a messy world and He died in a messy world. The cross is often portrayed as the bridge over the chasm that separates heaven and earth. It is our means of escape. But the reality is that it stands at the center of our decaying world—thrust into the dirt to proclaim “God is here!”