# THE EQUIP INSTITUTE Theme: Christian Belief Topic: The Work of Christ Spring 2024

## Introduction

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. The past two weeks, we have focused on the Person of Christ, and in this session will discuss the work of Christ.

## What is the Big Idea?

The work of Christ in his perfect life and sacrificial death is at the very heart of the gospel. Through these means, Jesus restores and fixes the broken relationship between God and humanity, ensuring the salvation of all those who believe in Christ. This idea is often called the **atonement**, literally, the "at-one-ment" (reconciliation) of humanity to God. As one scholar notes, atonement is substitutionary in nature: "Christ himself willingly submitted to the just penalty which we deserved, receiving it on our behalf and in our place so that we will not have to bear it ourselves."

The atonement was a **propitiatory** sacrifice by Christ whereby he appeased God's just wrath against human sin and established reconciliation between God and sinners. The atonement was also an **expiatory** offering in that it spiritually cleanses all those whom identify with the atonement through repentance and faith in Christ. Historically, evangelicals have understood the atonement to be at the heart of our salvation and one of the most important doctrines of the Christian faith.

# What do the Scriptures Say?

The idea of atonement is introduced in Genesis and Exodus as a means whereby human sins are covered in some sense through the sacrifice of animals. The animals function as substitutes for the men and women (Gen. 3:21; 4:4; 22:13-14; Exod. 12:13; cf. Heb. 11:4 and 1 Cor. 5:7).

Leviticus builds on this idea of substitutionary animal sacrifice by articulating a view of atonement wherein the blood of animals satisfies God's just wrath against human



sin. The atonement also cleanses the sins of those who identify with the sacrifice (Lev. 17:11).

The Prophet Isaiah further expands upon this idea by arguing that a suffering servant will offer himself up as a sinless sacrifice for his people. This act of human sacrifice makes atonement for the people and results in the exaltation of the servant (Isa. 53:4-12).

In the Gospels, John the Baptist identifies Jesus of Nazareth as the man who will sacrifice himself on behalf of the people. Jesus himself teaches that he will provide a saving sacrifice (Matt. 20:28; John 1:29; 10:11, 14-18).

The Apostle Paul writes at length about the salvation accomplished by Jesus' sinless life and atoning sacrifice. He explains that we've been reconciled with God because of Jesus' atonement. Our sins have been forgiven on account of Christ's righteousness being credited to us through faith. Rather than condemnation, we receive reconciliation. Key passages include Romans 5:6–11; 8:1– 5; 2 Corinthians 5:16–21; Ephesians 2:13–16.

No New Testament author teaches us more about the nature of the atonement than the writer of Hebrews. He argues that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrifices, which point to the final and forever sacrifice offered by Jesus. There is no need for further animal sacrifices in light of Christ's final, forever sacrifice. Key passages include 1:3; 2:9; 2:14–15; 7:26–27; 9:11–15; 9:22–28; 10:5–14.

#### What Has the Church Said?

Christians have offered at least five different models of the atonement at different points in church history.

 Atonement as Victory. During the Patristic Era (ca. 100– 600 AD), the most popular view of the atonement was that Christ conquered the devil on the cross, thus cancelling out his power over sin and death. Some added a controversial element to the idea of Christ's victory over Satan. In this view, Satan gained ownership rights over something that Satan didn't know: a sinless victim would ransom all the captives, transferring their ownership back to God. This has been called the "ransom theory".

Later advocates of the victory view distanced themselves from the "ransom theory" because it raised serious

questions about God's honesty. Most Christians today affirm the victory view, while rejecting the ransom theory.

2. Atonement as Satisfaction. During the eleventh century, Anselm of Canterbury articulated what has been called the satisfaction view of the atonement. In this view, God's holy honor has been offended because of human sin against his holiness. All humans now owe God a sin debt to satisfy his holy honor. Unfortunately, humans can't pay off this sin debt because sin, by its very nature, corrupts us and prevents us from pursuing true holiness. Sin has created a hopeless cycle of debt and damnation.

God's solution to human sin is the incarnation of the Son of God. In Jesus of Nazareth, the Son takes upon himself human nature, becoming the God-man. As a real man who never sins, Jesus becomes the first person to never accrue a sin debt. As the Son of God, he is able to use his obedience to pay off the sin debt of all people. This view uses the categories of medieval feudalism to explain the atonement. The satisfaction view became a popular view in Roman Catholicism for several centuries, though it died out in the late Middle Ages as feudalism waned.

3. Atonement as Example. During the twelfth century, Peter Abelard challenged Anselm's satisfaction view. Abelard's view is often called the "moral influence theory" of the atonement or the "exemplary theory" of the atonement. One scholar summarizes this view, saying: "When we look at the cross we see the greatness of divine love, which delivers us from fear and kindles in us an answering love. We respond to love with love and no longer live in selfishness and sin."

Abelard's views were not popular during the Middle Ages, but during the Reformation they were championed by a heretical movement in Poland called the Socinians. The exemplary view of the atonement was championed by theological liberals in the English-speaking world from the 1870s until the around the time of World War II.

4. Atonement as Governmental Justice. During the seventeenth century, many Arminians were dissatisfied with the penal substitution view of the Calvinists and the exemplary view of the Socinians—they thought both were extremes. Hugo Grotius developed the governmental view of the atonement. This view argues that God is the supreme ruler of the universe whole rule is undermined by the presence of sin. The sinless Savior was crucified as a public display of God's displeasure against sin and its

harmful effects on the world. The cross was intended to motivate sinners to seek pardon through repentance and faith. The governmental view has never been widely held. Its most famous advocates were early Arminians, the New Divinity theologians in New England, and the famous 19th-century evangelist Charles Finney.

5. Atonement as Penal Substitution. During the Reformation, the Reformed tradition further developed the satisfaction view into what we now call the penal substitution view. In penal substitutionary atonement, Jesus Christ perfectly kept God's law and then offered himself up as a sinless substitute for sinners. On the cross, he absorbed God's just wrath against sin, guaranteeing the salvation of all who believe. Redemption was accomplished at Calvary, though it is applied when a sinner repents and believes.

John Calvin popularized the view among Reformed Christians, who later included it in their famous post-Reformation confessional statements. John Wesley popularized the view among evangelical Arminians. Today, nearly all evangelical theologians affirm penal substitution as being an important part of the atonement.

## What Should We Believe?

Penal substitutionary atonement best accounts for the biblical teaching about Christ's saving work on behalf of humanity, while the victory view best accounts for the biblical teaching about Christ's saving work on behalf of the created order. Perhaps it is best to think of the atonement in this way: the victory view focuses upon the *cosmic effects* of the atonement, while the penal substitution view focuses upon the *personal effects* of the atonement.

## How Should We Then Live?

Understanding penal substitution is essential for faithfully proclaiming the "personal" gospel that God saves sinners through the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Understanding the atonement as Christ's victory over Satan is essential for faithfully proclaiming the "cosmic" gospel that God is redeeming the fallen created order through the finished work of Jesus Christ. Understanding Christ's exemplary love as a key motivation for and fruit of the atonement is essential for faithful Christian leadership.

## **Recommended Resources**

John Stott, The Cross of Christ, 3rd ed. (IVP, 2021).

J. I. Packer, What Did the Cross Achieve? (Crossway, 2023).

Jeremy Treat, *The Atonement: An Introduction* (Crossway, 2023).

Leon Morris, The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance (IVP Academic, 1984).

John Hammett and Charles Quarles, *The Work of Christ* (B&H Academic, 2024).