

# Original sin and the Atonement

Jeff Speaks  
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## 1. THE PUZZLE OF ORIGINAL SIN

The Nicene Creed says that ‘baptism is for the forgiveness of sins.’ If this is right, then even very young babies must be guilty of sins for which they need forgiveness. This is ‘original sin.’

It is not hard to find this doctrine puzzling. Here is what Pascal said about it:

“For it is beyond doubt that there is nothing which more shocks our reason than to say that the sin of the first man has rendered guilty those, who, being so removed from this source, seem incapable of participation in it. This transmission does not only seem to us impossible, it seems also very unjust. For what is more contrary to the rules of our miserable justice than to damn eternally an infant incapable of will, for a sin wherein he seems to have so little a share, that it was committed six thousand years before he was in existence? Certainly nothing offends us more rudely than this doctrine...”

To respond to this worry, we need to answer the difficult question: exactly what are we guilty of at birth?

There have been two main answers to this question: (1) We are guilty of Adam’s sin, and (2) we are guilty for the corruption of our own nature.

The problem is that there seems to be a simple argument that neither (1) nor (2) is true:

1. If I am guilty for X, then I must have, at some time, had a choice about whether X occurred.
2. I never had a choice about whether Adam would sin.
3. I never had a choice about whether my nature would be corrupt.

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C. I am guilty neither for Adam’s sin nor for the corruption of my nature. (1,2,3)

St. Anselm seems to reject the first premise of this argument:

“If you think it over... this sentence of condemnation of infants is not very different from the verdict of human beings. Suppose, for example, some man and his wife were exalted to some great dignity and estate, by no merit of their own but by favor alone, then both together inexcusably commit a grave crime, and on account of it are justly dispossessed and reduced to slavery. Who will say that the children whom they generate after their condemnation should not be subjected to the same slavery, but rather should be gratuitously put in possession of the goods which their parents deservedly lost? Our first ancestors and their offspring are in such a condition: having been justly condemned to be cast from happiness to misery for their fault, they bring forth their offspring in the same banishment.”

Is this plausible?

Anselm also says things that imply the falsity of premise (2):

“But there is no doubt from what source each and every individual is bound by that debt which we are discussing. It certainly does not arise from his being human or from his being a person ... then Adam, before he sinned, would have to have been bound by this debt, because he was a human being and a person. But this is most absurd. The only reason left, then, for the individual’s being under obligation is that he is Adam, yet not simply that he is Adam, but that he is Adam the sinner.”

How can we make sense of this extremely surprising view?

Jonathan Edwards suggests the following answer:

“Some things are entirely distinct, and very diverse, which yet are so united by the established law of the Creator, that by virtue of that establishment, they are in a sense one. Thus a tree, grown great, and a hundred years old, is one plant with the little sprout, that first came out of the ground from whence it grew, and has been continued in constant succession; though it is now so exceeding diverse, many thousand times bigger, and of a very different form, and perhaps not one atom the very same...

And there is no identity or oneness but what depends on the arbitrary constitution of the Creator; who by his wise sovereign establishment so unites these successive new effects, that he treats them as one ...”

Is it plausible to hold that we are identical with Adam, in virtue of God willing that that be the case? And, if so, would that help with the problem of original sin?

A different response to the argument: rejecting premise (1) for the same reason that we often regard people as blameworthy or praiseworthy for traits about which they had no choice. Could original sin fall into this category?

## 2. THREE THEORIES OF THE ATONEMENT

This much is clear: the crucifixion is supposed to be a part of God's plan for salvation: God's plan to give us the chance to overcome death. The central philosophical question which the crucifixion raises is: why did God's plan to save us from death have to involve the crucifixion? What role does the crucifixion play in our salvation?

### 2.1. *Moral exemplar theories*

One answer to this question is that the purpose of the crucifixion is to provide us with an example of a morally perfect life, which we might then imitate in an attempt to reconcile ourselves to God. Approaches to the atonement of this sort are often called moral exemplar theories.

There is nothing especially objectionable about the claim that Christ on the cross provides for us a moral example. But there are serious problems with the idea that this can provide a fully satisfactory theory of the meaning of the crucifixion.

Problem 1: Pelagianism.

Problem 2: For if the meaning of the crucifixion is to provide us with a moral example, we must ask: why is allowing oneself to be crucified unjustly when one has the means to prevent it a morally exemplary thing to do? Whatever answer we give to this question will show that moral exemplar theories are, at best, incomplete. For if there is something especially morally exemplary about the crucifixion, then that thing — whatever it is — will be the answer to our question about the point of the crucifixion. The moral exemplar theory, by contrast, seems just to make the empty claim that submitting to the crucifixion was morally exemplary because it was morally exemplary.

### 2.2. *The Christus Victor model*

The *Catechism* describes the crucifixion as a *ransom*. If Christ's death was a ransom, to whom was it paid, and for what?

Here's one way to understand the view: by sin, people have freely placed themselves in Satan's power. God wishes to free us from Satan, and hence from death. His way of executing this plan is to offer the Son as ransom for humanity. Satan is willing to take this bargain because, knowing of Christ's miracles, he thinks that Christ is a more desirable target than the rest of humanity.

The idea is that the fact that Christ is a human being fools the devil into thinking that Christ can be bound by death in the way that human beings — until that time — were.

Satan can't condemn Jesus to death in the way that he can condemn other human beings to death, by tempting them to sin — since Jesus does not sin. So the only way for Satan to trap Jesus in death is to trade the human beings in his power — all of us — for Jesus. God's triumph over Satan then comes with the resurrection.

There is no denying that this model of the Atonement has a great deal of explanatory power. It explains why Jesus had to become flesh, and it explains why Jesus had to die. But many have also found it objectionable.

Anselm objected to it as follows:

When we say to these people, 'It was from .. the power of the devil that God ransomed us, and he came himself to drive out the devil on our behalf because we were ourselves incapable of this, and he bought back the kingdom of heaven for us, and, through the fact that he did all these things in this way, he showed us how much he loved us', they reply, 'If you say that God could not have done all these things merely by commanding that they should be done—the same God whom you say created all things by issuing commands—you are contradicting yourselves, because you are making him out to be powerless. Alternatively, if you admit that he could have acted, but did not wish to act, other than in this way, how can you show him to be wise, while asserting that he wishes for no reason to suffer such indignities?

One possible reply: Satan really did have a claim on humanity, given our free choice to follow Satan in sin. Hence a perfectly good being would, if at all possible, rescue humanity by offering terms Satan himself would accept. And the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was the only way to do that.

### *2.3. The penal substitution theory*

The penal substitution theory is quite different. It holds that when we sin we incur a debt to God which we need to repay. God cannot give us eternal life when we owe him this debt, since that would violate justice. The problem is that we cannot repay this debt, since we cannot give to God anything which we do not already owe to God. But Jesus can:

“No member of the human race except Christ ever gave to God, by dying, anything which that person was not at some time going to lose as a matter of necessity. Nor did anyone ever pay a debt to God which he did not owe. But Christ of his own accord gave to his Father what he was never going to lose as a matter of necessity, and he paid, on behalf of sinners, a debt which he did not owe. ... He was in no way needy on his own account, or subject to compulsion from others, to whom he owed nothing, unless it was punishment that he owed them. Nevertheless, he gave his life...”

So Christ gave more than he owed; which means that the Father owed him a reward. But Christ, being God, was already perfect, and hence not able to be rewarded. So Christ decided, of his own free will, to give his reward to the people who had killed him.

Why this is called 'penal substitution.' Lewis' argument that we are all 'of two minds' about penal substitution.