

Three theories of the Atonement

A central part of Christian doctrine is that Christ died for us. More specifically, it is held that Christ died on the cross so that our sins could be forgiven. In this way, Christ's death is supposed to be a crucial element of God's plan for our salvation. This event — Christ's death making possible our salvation — is called 'the Atonement.'

The Atonement raises a number of different interrelated philosophical questions:

- 1) Why did Christ die on the cross?
- 2) How does Christ dying make it possible for our sins to be forgiven?
- 3) If God is omnipotent, why couldn't God forgive our sins without Christ dying?

A theory of the Atonement is an attempt to answer questions like these three.

We can distinguish three different theories of the atonement.

1. MORAL EXEMPLAR THEORIES

One sort of theory, which is often described but rarely advocated, 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.

Two problems for moral exemplar theories: (i) Pelagianism, (ii) the problem of understanding why death on the cross would be morally exemplary if it did not also have some other more central purpose in explaining salvation.

2. THE RANSOM THEORY

An early model of the atonement emphasizes Christ's death as a ransom. One finds this language also in the Catechism, which says that the Crucifixion is "the ransom that would free men from the slavery of sin."

But if Christ's death was a ransom, to whom was it paid, and for what?

The traditional answer to this question is that it was a ransom paid to Satan. The idea is that by sinning, human beings have freely put themselves in Satan's power. God wishes to free us from Satan, and hence from death.

So God has to offer Satan something for which Satan is willing to trade all of us. God's idea is then to send Jesus to earth in human form. Satan is fooled into thinking that Jesus is human, but not God. But Satan sees Jesus performing miracles, and so thinks of Jesus as more valuable than the rest of humanity combined. As Gregory of Nyssa put it,

'When the enemy saw the power, he recognized in Christ a bargain which offered him more than he held. For this reason he chose him as the ransom for those whom he had shut up in death's prison.'

Satan can't condemn Jesus to death by tempting him into 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.

Anselm gave several objections to this theory: (i) it seems to make God less than omnipotent; (ii) it is mysterious why God should have to respect any supposed claim that Satan has on us; (iii) it makes God a deceiver.

3. SATISFACTION/PUNISHMENT THEORIES

Anselm was the first to defend a family of views which, since then, have been the most popular approach to the Atonement.

These views include theses of the following sort:

- a) Our sins have effect X
- b) X requires us to be punished with death unless Y is done
- c) We are unable to do Y
- d) Christ's death does Y

On Anselm's theory, X=taking away honor from God, and Y=repaying God for this. The reason why we are unable to repay God for this is that, as Anselm put it,

‘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...’

Christ gave more than he owed the Father, so the Father owed him a reward. Christ, of his own free will, decides to reward the people who have killed him by freeing them from death.

This is sometimes called a *satisfaction* theory. On this kind of theory, Jesus gives to the Father something more than Jesus owed, and which then can be a reparation for our sins.

Two objections to Anselm's theory: (i) is honor really this important, and does it make sense to say that we have taken away honor from God? (ii) why on this view is the Crucifixion required? Why wouldn't simply coming to earth as a human being be enough?

Swinburne's account is a kind of satisfaction theory.

A later modification of Anselm's theory holds that X=making it just for us to die, and hence making it such that God — a perfectly just being — should let us die.

What then is Y? On many views, it is Jesus suffering our punishment for us, and hence making it possible for a just God to give us eternal life. Call this a *punishment* theory.

What is Lewis' central criticism of punishment theories? Would this carry over to satisfaction theories?