

Christianity and the Blood Atonement of Jesus

According to Mircea Eliade † “There is no single New Testament Doctrine of the Atonement—there is simply a collection of images and metaphors with some preliminary analysis and reflection from which subsequent tradition built its systematic doctrines and theories.” Moreover, “Paul is our earliest written source for the dimensions of atonement in apostolic preaching (NIV 1Cor. 15:3) ... ‘For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures’”.

†*The Encyclopædia of Religion, Vol. 1.* (MacMillan Publishing Co., New York, 1987) p. 496

Over its history, the Christian church has crystallized the “Remembrance Supper”, which Jesus hosted for the Apostles in the home of John Mark on the evening preceding his crucifixion (the evening before the Jewish feast of the Passover), into a sacrament that reflects various understandings about “Blood Atonement”. Although these crystallizations do overlap in many ways, the beliefs underpinning were derived from five main theories:

- a. **Ransom Theory** (Irenaeus, 130-202, Bishop of Lyons):

This theory states that the crucifixion of Christ was necessary in order to pay the Devil (Satan) and release mankind from the inherited sin caused by the Fall of Adam.

Origen (I 85-253), Head of the Catechetical School of Alexandria, embellished upon this idea by stating that Christ offered himself as a ransom to Satan and Satan accepted the payment. However, Satan did not realize that he would not be able to retain such hold because Christ was both divine and holy. As a result, the souls of men, including the ones held in Hades, were set free from the evil clutches of Satan. ¹

- b. **Satisfaction Theory** (Anselm, 1033-1109, Archbishop of Canterbury)

In his manuscript, *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm stated that instead of God owing Satan, man owed God. Anselm supports this idea with the premise that, unlike Jesus, man does not submit his full will to God. Accordingly, sin results. And sin is an affront to God! It was Anselm's belief that “... nothing is less tolerable than that the creature should take away from the Creator the honour due to Him, and not repay what (man) takes away.” As a result, man must indemnify God.

Moreover, according to Anselm, God cannot overlook such sin because “...God upholds nothing more justly than he doth the honour of his own dignity.” The ‘debt’ required a satisfaction which man could not pay, therefore, only God or a God-man could pay back such ‘debt’. Consequently, Jesus had to become a man in order to die and pay back the ‘debt’ for mankind. Anselm further states that the sinless Jesus did this freely for the honour of God, thereby releasing mankind of the ‘debt’ owed and securing salvation for all. ²

- c. **Moral-Influence Theory** (Peter Abelard, 1079-1142, Abbot of the Monastery at Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuis)

Abelard's view was that Jesus' death was the supreme devotion of the love which Jesus had for mankind.

Christian Blood Atonement Theory

Consequently, this love was conceived to evoke such love in the human heart, which in effect brought the individual closer to God. ³

d. ***Penal-Substitution Theory*** (John Calvin, 1509-64, Protestant Theologian)

This view of 'Atonement' characterizes the theory that modern day conservative Protestant churches follow. According to this theory, sin in and of itself denotes death for the sinner. Therefore, but for the sacrifice made by Christ, mankind cannot have eternal life because of sins committed. A sinless Christ substituted himself to make full restitution for the penalty owed by mankind caused on account of sin. As a result, mankind's sins were imputed to Jesus while his righteousness was imputed to all mortals. He suffered in man's place and died to release

mankind from the penalty consequential to sin.

This view, which acknowledges man's fundamental depravity (original sin) coupled with an inability to save himself, emphasizes the righteousness of God's wrath. ⁴

e. ***Legal/Government Theory*** (Hugo Grotius, 1583-1645, Dutch Jurist)

According to Grotius, God's law states that "the soul that sins shall die". Therefore, strict justice requires the eternal death of sinners. Forgiveness in and of itself does not uphold the law. Christ's death was merely a public display of the depth of sin and the extent to which God would go to uphold the righteous or moral order of the Universe. Consequently, Christ died on our behalf but not as a substitute. ⁵

¹ J.R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 2nd Edition (Inter-Varsity Press, 1989) p. 113; L. Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Baker Book House, 1975) p. 166.

² *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1980) pp. 12-14.

³ *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion*; EN 3, p. 90.

⁴ D. Pecota, *The Saving Work of Christ in Systematic Theology: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Logion Press, Springfield, Mo. 1994) p. 742.

⁵ *Ibid* p. 341.