

# Models of Atonement

By  
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What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!  
What wondrous love is this, O my soul!  
What wondrous love is this  
That caused the Lord of bliss  
To bear the dreadful curse  
For my soul, for my soul,  
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul?

When we sing such lines we are thanking God for the gracious action that led to our salvation. When the dying Jesus bears the curse for my soul, the result is my salvation. That's what the Bible says. Now, just what does this mean? Just how is it that what Jesus Christ did accomplishes salvation for me and for the world?

When systematic theologians get their hands on such questions, they utter big words. The big word here is *Atonement*. How should we understand the atoning work of Jesus Christ? In the theological brief that follows we will examine six conceptual models or theories of atonement:

1. Jesus as the Teacher of True Knowledge
2. Jesus as Moral Example and Influence
3. Jesus as Victorious Champion
4. Jesus as Satisfaction
5. Jesus as the Happy Exchange
6. Jesus as the Final Scapegoat

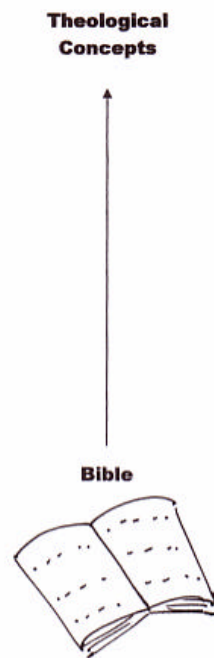
But before dispensing thoughts on these six models, here are some pre-thoughts.

## Pre-Thoughts about Atonement

*Pre-Thought #1: words.* To think about this question, we will need to borrow some big words from the theologians. Two of these multi-syllable words are *Soteriology* and *Atonement*. The first, 'soteriology', comes from the Greek New Testament, *soteria*, meaning salvation. Soteriology is the study of salvation;

and it focuses on the work of Christ. The second term, 'atonement', is an English word substituted for the biblical word, *hilasterion*, which means propitiation or expiation and connotes blood sacrifice. Do Christians believe in the effectiveness of sacrifice? No. Protestants are especially vehement in opposing the admission of sacrifice into Christian thinking. So, when interpreting New Testament references to the work of Christ as a sacrifice, we frequently use the term 'atonement'. When we take this word apart we get 'at-one-ment' or reconciliation. All this leads to a fuller version of the question: how does Jesus' atoning work accomplish our salvation?

*Pre-Thought #2: dogma.* Next is a curiosity of history. All Christian churches recognize what is called the *Christological Dogma*. According to this dogma, Jesus Christ is fully divine and fully human. More technically, Jesus Christ is *one person with two natures*, a divine nature and a human nature. This belief has dogmatic status because it was voted on and approved at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, a council in which every church in the known world at that time was represented. It is binding on Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox believers, and Protestants.



All theological concepts, including dogmas, are mental models that try to interpret what the Bible says. We have a dogma for the *person of Christ*. But—now, here is the curiosity!—we have no dogma for the *work of Christ*. What does this mean? It means this: no single interpretation of the Bible is exclusively dogmatic. As we read the New Testament, multiple interpretations seem to emerge. We can construct multiple models or concepts or theories regarding the atoning work of Christ. And, no dogma judges which one of these is exclusively the one we must believe to be Christian. Differing interpretations or models sit side by side without adjudication. Actually, this makes thinking about the work of Christ much more intriguing.

*Pre-Thought #3: objective atonement and subjective salvation.* An important question lurks just under these different models of Jesus' atoning work. The question is this: if Jesus Christ's atoning work accomplishes salvation for the world, how does this apply to your and my individual salvation? Christ's work for the world we call *objective*, and our personal appropriation we call *subjective*. The Reformation theologian Martin Luther (1483-1546) kept repeating in Latin, *pro me*, which means "for me". He emphasized that Jesus Christ's work on behalf of the world is above all a work for you and for me in an individual and most personal way. So, when we look at models of atonement, we need to ask: just how does Christ's objective work become subjectively appropriated by each of us personally?

In what follows we will look briefly at six concepts or models of atonement that have appeared in the history of Christian theology. They are not dogmas. Rather, they are rival interpretations of what the New Testament says about the work of Jesus Christ. Let's ask: should we select the one we like best and make it our dogma? Or, should we think of them as complementary and benefit from them all?

## **1. Jesus as Teacher of True Knowledge**

One way to think about Jesus is to picture him as a teacher, the teacher of true knowledge or final wisdom about God and about what resides within our individual souls. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), says Jesus. The way to salvation is what Jesus teaches us.

According to this model, the human predicament consists of ignorance. We in the human race live in darkness, unable on our own to find the path to salvation. What Jesus does to effect our salvation is to show us the way, to provide us with divine knowledge and wisdom. Christ is the light shining within our darkness. All we need to do is walk the path Jesus illumines.

Knowledge is light, and to have knowledge is to be enlightened. Jesus Christ is the "light of the world" (John 8:12) who shows us the way to God. One of the symbols of Jesus as teacher is the oil lamp, reflecting the psalmist's "lamp unto my feet" (Psalm 119:103).



We remember Jesus as a teacher. His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) fits the model of a classroom instructor. This is the model employed most frequently by modern liberal Protestants. The liberal wing of Protestantism emphasizes the moral teachings of Jesus; and Christianity becomes a religion distinguished by ethical living. The teachings of Jesus tell us how to live as Christians and as good citizens.

Yet, even though ethical living is important to Christians everywhere, this is not quite what our predecessors in the ancient churches intended. According to the model of Jesus as teacher, he embodied in his life and being the *logos*, the rational principle which holds together everything in the cosmos (John 1:1-14). Most Bibles translate *logos* from Greek to English with the word “word” or “the Word of God.” The *logos* is the structure of God’s mind. To read God’s Word and to think rationally is to trace in our own minds the thoughts of God. Some Christian theologians actually considered the pre-Christian philosophers of ancient Athens to be at-one with Christ, because they thought rationally. To use reason, the theologians said, is to participate in the very being of Christ; and to participate in Christ is to participate in God’s life.

Sometimes Wisdom is interchanged with *logos*. The Greek term for wisdom is *Sophia*. Jesus becomes the incarnate teacher of true reason or true wisdom.



Christ as Wisdom, *Sophia*.  
Lyons, 11<sup>th</sup> Century.

How do we make this personal? By conforming our minds to the mind of Christ. To attach ourselves in meditation to Jesus Christ is to be connected to the light of the world and the wisdom of God. Jesus saves because he shows us the way--actually, he is the way—to salvation.

## 2. Jesus as Moral Example and Influence

Our second model is closely related to the first. Here Jesus is also a teacher, but what Jesus teaches is not the wisdom of the eternal *logos*. Rather, what Jesus teaches is love. As mentioned above, Jesus was literally a teacher in his own day; and in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) he tells us to love our neighbor. Yet, still more is involved here. The primary way of teaching is by example. Jesus himself lived a life of devotion to God; and by his willingness to walk the way of the cross he provides an example of devoted love toward the world. Jesus provides a moral example we should copy.

What is the human predicament from which we are being saved? Again, ignorance. Our ignorance involves lack of awareness of just how to love one another. We love naturally, of course; but we love ourselves and those in our families or business partners who can reciprocate love. We love when it profits us. In shocking contrast, by example Jesus teaches us to love the other as other,

to love outsiders and even enemies. By willingly accepting death on the cross, Jesus models for us the life of unselfish love. He models the life of self-sacrificial love or *agape*. Our task as Christians is to copy Jesus.

Imagine a family of starving pelicans. No food is available. The mother pelican is dedicated to the survival of her chicks. Rather than see them starve, she pecks at her own chest until a wound opens up. Then she plucks meat from her own heart to feed her young. This results in her death. But her children live. In European Christianity, the pelican-in-her-piety has become a symbol of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ.



What Jesus reveals is the heart of God. God is loving, even to the point of sacrifice for the benefit of the human race. <sup>NRS</sup> John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." We appropriate this objective love of God for the world into our subjective lives by copying Jesus. When we copy Jesus, we copy God.

Little more than a century ago a liberal Protestant pastor named Charles Sheldon wrote a very popular book, *In His Steps*. For each moral moment in life, the book's characters would ask, "what would Jesus do?" In recent decades Evangelical Christians have shortened it to WWJD? and placed it on bumper stickers. This, like the hymn of Washington Gladden (1836-1918), "O Master let me walk with you," reflects the moral example and influence model of atonement.

We have just described the moral example portion of this atonement model. What about influence? This model originates with the theology of Peter Abelard (1079-1142), who believed that the story of God's love for us is very inspiring. It is so inspiring, he thought, that to merely hear the gospel of God's love for us transforms us. The message of God's love itself has the power to turn our hearts toward caring for others. "Love answers loves' appeal," he said. Due to this influence on us, we can actually love self-sacrificially. When we love self-sacrificially, we are participating in the very love of God and establishing God's kingdom on earth. This is salvation.

Although these first two atonement models are ancient, they are alive and well among liberal Protestants today. The reliance upon reason (*logos*) has faded somewhat; yet, the emphasis on appropriating God's love into our daily lives by emulating what is taught to us by Jesus' example is the guiding principle. Philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) lifted up Jesus as our moral ideal; and the father of liberal Protestantism, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), saw the rise of God consciousness in today's Christians as the subjective appropriation of Jesus' consciousness by members of the church. Harry Emerson Fosdick (1878-1969), the prophetic voice of God's coming kingdom for

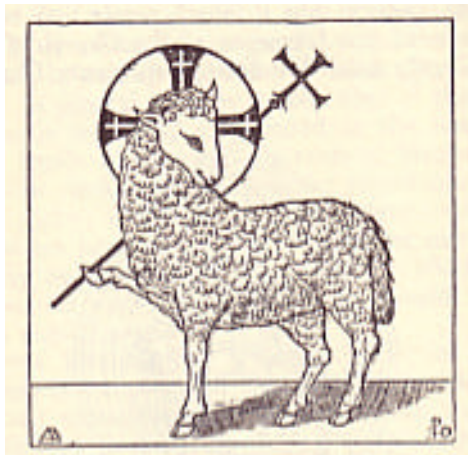
nearly a half century at Riverside Church in New York City, left us with the musical refrain, “Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour.” That hymn, titled “God of Grace and God of Glory,” includes this ethical vision: “Cure your children’s waring madness; bend our pride to your control...lest we miss your kingdom’s goal.”

The Greek cross, with four arms of equal length, marks the point where the wisdom of heaven and earth intersect. When five Greek crosses appear together, it reminds us of the five wounds of Jesus. The Greek cross has been adopted by the *Red Cross*, a humanitarian relief agency.



### 3. Jesus as Victorious Champion and Liberator

Our third model of atonement is quite different from the first two. We will call it “Jesus as Victorious Champion” in English, *Christus Victor* in Latin. It capitalizes on the image of Jesus as warrior, as a soldier triumphant in battle. The enemies that lay defeated are death, the devil, and sin. Jesus’ weapons are God’s grace and power. The victory is rising from the dead on the first Easter. Jesus was never literally a soldier, to be sure; so this imagery is strictly metaphorical and symbolic.



The prancing lamb represents the Easter resurrection.

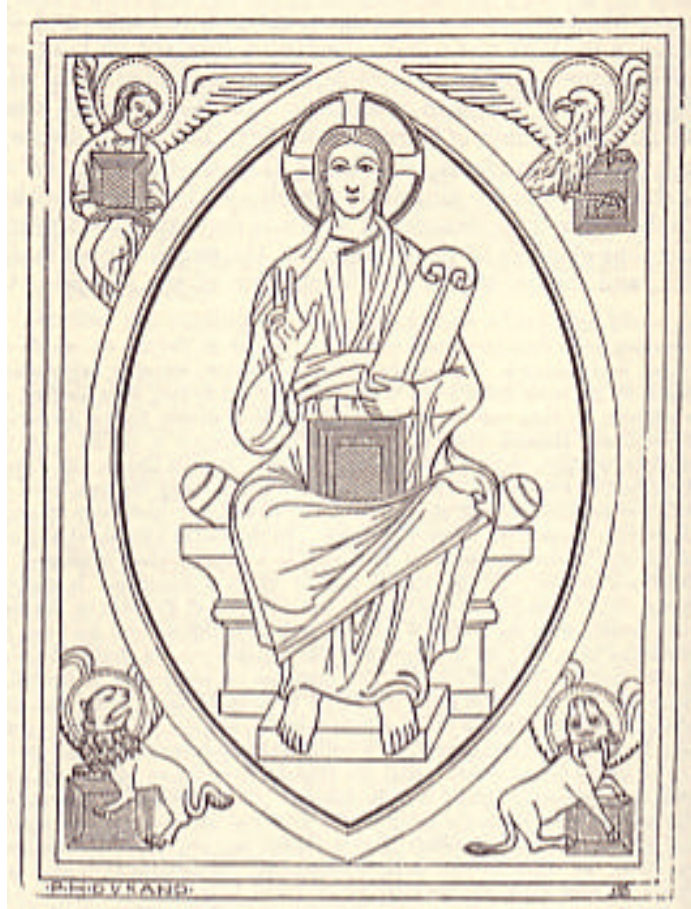
It is the Easter resurrection which marks the decisive victory. Death is defeated. During divine liturgy, the Orthodox sing, “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs, bestowing life.” Eternal life for us is the spoil of this cosmic battle between God and the enemies of God.

In addition to death, Christ the Victor wins over all the enemies of God, all the forces of destruction and evil, including the devil and his legions. The most vivid imagery is that of St. Michael and All Angels. St. Michael is another name for Jesus Christ, who is “faithful and true,” riding a white horse and leading a triumphant army that overthrows the rule of Satan. Note the symbolic language in our Bible’s last book. <sup>NRS</sup> Revelation 12:7ff. “Michael and his angels fought against the dragon.... The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world....Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, ‘Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah’.”



In this 10<sup>th</sup> century Italian ivory carving, we see Jesus as *Christus Victor* defeating the serpent, the lion, the basilisk (fire breathing lizard) and the dragon.

Jesus Christ is enthroned as “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Revelation 19:11-16). In Christian art, especially in Eastern Orthodoxy, Jesus is painted on the underside of church domes as the *pantocrator*.



This 11<sup>th</sup> century ivory carving depicts Jesus Christ, the Pantocrator, victorious and ruling the cosmos.

Protestants since the Reformation tend to represent the victorious Christ quite modestly by placing an empty cross—the Latin cross—in their church chancel. The empty cross without the body of the dying Jesus signifies the resurrection. The chains of suffering and death have been broken and our human future liberated from the power of the devil.



When the Latin cross sits on three steps, it adds to the resurrection victory our appropriation of the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love (1 Corinthians 13:13).



In rare instances, a church will display the *Christus Rex*, or “Christ the King” cross, which displays not the suffering Jesus but the Pantocrator. Combining the Easter Christ with a verbal *Christus Rex* at coronation, Matthew Bridges (1800-1894 and Godfrey Thring (1823-1903) lead us in singing:

Crown him the Lord of life,  
Who triumphed o’er the grave;  
And rose victorious in the strife  
For those he came to save.

Jesus Christ saves us by liberating us from bondage to death, the devil, and sin. Release from bondage is sometimes alluded to as release from slavery. Metaphorically, Jesus gives his life as a “ransom” (Mark 10:45) to purchase our freedom. Our word *redemption* implies liberation from slavery.

Now, how does this apply to us personally? How does Christ’s objective victory and work of liberation become appropriated subjectively? Two avenues are important, namely, prolepsis and grace. First, the Easter resurrection of Jesus was a prolepsis or anticipation of our own future resurrection. As Jesus rose, so will we rise into the new creation. Christ is the first fruits. We will follow. <sup>NRS</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:20 “Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.”

Our resurrection will occur in the future. Yet, we can experience the power of Christ’s resurrection in our lives now, ahead of time. This is what we mean by *prolepsis*, the embodiment ahead of time of a future reality. <sup>NRS</sup> Romans 6:4 “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” <sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

The second avenue we usually refer to as grace. It is grace overcoming sin. Yes, Jesus Christ died and was raised for the forgiveness of sins. But, there is more. The power of the victorious Christ becomes available to us through the work of the Holy Spirit. The human predicament as St. Augustine (354-430) explained it is that our self is curved in upon itself. We are born selfish, so to speak; so all our perceptions and all our desires and all our plans are oriented toward our own selfish wellbeing and benefit. Yet, to be godly, we must love others as we love ourselves; perhaps even love others self-sacrificially. Now, just how are we going to liberate ourselves from ourselves? The answer is this: the Holy Spirit places the power of Jesus Christ to overcome death, the devil, and sin within our soul. By entering the depths of our inner life, the Holy Spirit cuts under our self-orientation, so to speak, and implants the disposition to faith, hope, and love. All this happens in our faith, and is reflected in Martin Luther’s prayerful hymn.

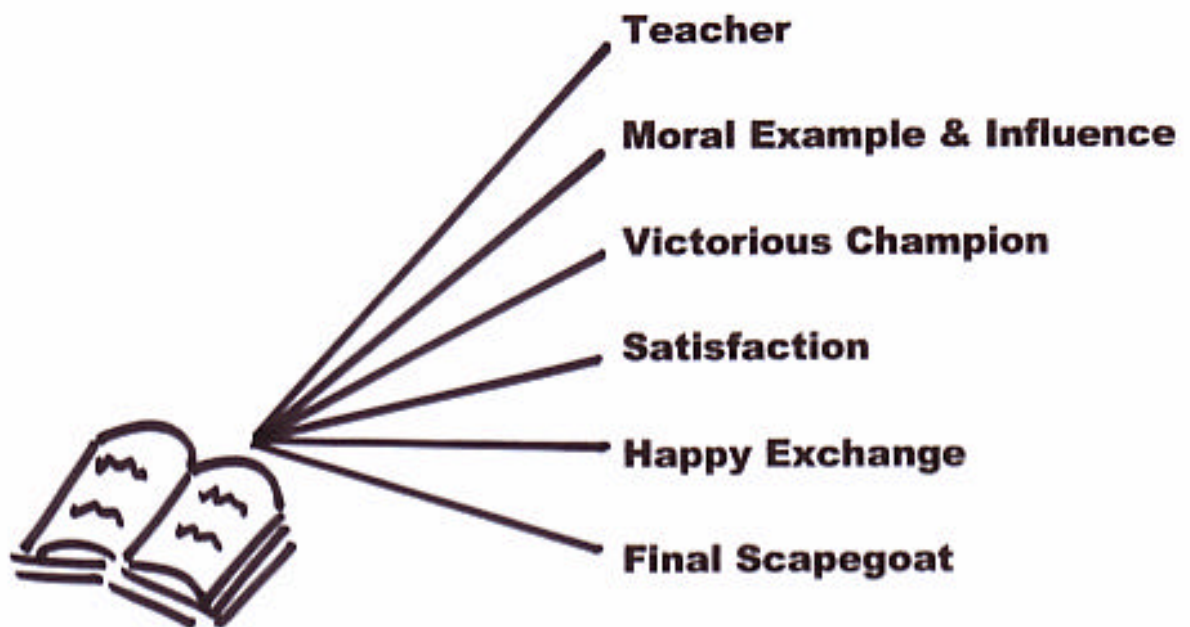
Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord,  
with all your graces now outpoured.  
On each believer’s mind and heart,  
your fervent love to them impart.

Liberation theology in Latin America along with feminist and black theology in North America have found the image of Jesus as the Victorious Champion key to unlocking the chains of economic, cultural, and political bondage. Like the victor over death and the devil, Jesus for the liberation theologians is the liberator of the poor and oppressed. Frequently, liberation leaders combine Jesus as liberator with Jesus as teacher and moral example.

The introduction of the concept of liberation into the model of the victorious champion alters it slightly. A victorious champion requires an enemy to be defeated. In the case of liberation, in contrast, the oppressors are not considered enemies. The oppressors too are beloved of God and among the beneficiaries of salvation. The oppressors need to be visited by Jesus as teacher and by Jesus as moral example in order to be liberated from their false consciousness, a false consciousness that justifies their exploitation of the poor and the marginalized. Salvation in Jesus Christ comes to both the slaves and the enslavers.

Because having losers is not the point of winning, some liberation and feminist theologians have sought to downplay Christian triumphalism. Military imagery is avoided. Hymns such as "Onward Christian Soldiers" by Sabine Baring-Gould (1834-1924) are not sung in these circles; because they are thought to inspire Christian imperialism and foster a militaristic mindset.

Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulen (1879-1977) made us aware that the model of *Christus Victor* or Victorious Champion has occupied a vivid place in the history of Christian spirituality. It is central to the traditions of Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodoxy. Even when combined with other models, it is seldom absent from Christian art, music, and worship.



#### 4. Jesus as Our Satisfaction

When the word 'atonement' comes up, we most frequently rely on our fourth model: *Jesus as our satisfaction*. Variants on this model are called 'substitutionary atonement', 'penal substitution', or even 'blood atonement'. The work of Christ in atoning for our sins renders us forgiven, or just, or justified. The blood of Christ renders us clean, righteous, ready to stand in God's presence. Why does Jesus' death accomplish this? Satisfaction of the need for cosmic justice is one theological answer. The idea of satisfaction is a narrow theological concept, which is used to interpret a large collection of verbal symbols in the Bible: blood, lamb, sheep, the Good Shepherd, scapegoat, the "lamb upon the throne," high priest, and such.



The symbol of the Good Shepherd tells us that God cares for us like a shepherd who so loves his sheep that he would lay down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). The New Testament mixes together the Good Shepherd with the sacrificial lamb and the scapegoat. Just how should we think about this? One way is to employ the model of satisfaction.

Our word 'satisfaction' comes from St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), who wrote a book, *Cur Deus Homo?* asking: why did God become human in Jesus Christ? Anselm began by describing the world as God originally created it. It was a world of order, a world of justice. All things were ordered in harmony for the benefit of God's creatures. It is God's will that we creatures enjoy lives of fulfillment, felicity, and blessedness. Human disobedience in the form of sin, however, has disrupted the world order. Like defaulting on a mortgage, humanity cannot pay what it owes to make amends. As a result, justice requires that humans be disqualified from enjoying the blessedness God had originally planned. Does this mean God's will has been thwarted by human sin?

God, however, wants to press on. God wants to deliver blessedness despite human sin and still in harmony with the order of justice. God confronts a dilemma. Neither God alone nor humanity alone can pay the debt to satisfy what is required by the order of justice. On the one hand, if God simply forgives humanity for its sinful disobedience, then this would throw the order of justice out of sync. It would introduce disorder into the creation. So, God can't just write it off and forget the loss. On the other hand, the human race cannot fix what is broken either. The damage is too severe. No human being has the moral capital to repay the debt. Only justice in the form of retribution can repair the broken creation. But this means humanity will get punishment rather than blessedness. What's a loving God to do?!

An offering to satisfy justice must be made from the human side; but only God has the capacity for making such satisfaction. Because only God is able to make the offering that we ought to make, it must be made by a combination of the divine and the human. Therefore, concludes Anselm, the incarnation is necessary to accomplish salvation. Now we know why God became human.

Whew. That's quite an argument! What St. Anselm is trying to do is provide a coherent concept of atonement that explains why Jesus' death results in our salvation. We need to think about passages such as this: <sup>NRS</sup> Romans 3:25 It is Jesus Christ "whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed."

Jesus' voluntary death is what triggers atonement. This leads Christian poets and artists and hymn writers to lift up biblical images of Jesus dying on the cross. The favorite version of the cross is the crucifix, where the suffering and dying Jesus is depicted hanging from the tree of condemnation.



In some iconography, the chest of the dying Jesus will be open with blood spilling from his body into the communion chalice. Alternatively, the prancing lamb will shed its blood into the Eucharistic cup.



Note here it is the prancing lamb of the victorious champion and not the sacrificial lamb that is depicted. Martin Luther combines *Christus Victor* and satisfaction in his Large Catechism: Jesus Christ "has snatched us, poor lost creatures, from the jaws of hell, won us, made us free, and restored us to the Father's favor and grace....He suffered, died, and was buried that he might make *satisfaction* for me and pay what I owed, not with silver and gold, but with his own precious blood."<sup>1</sup> Liturgical Christians sing during worship the *agnus dei*, "O Christ thou lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world." Lamb symbolism, blood symbolism, and satisfaction theology imbue the church life of North American evangelicals including fundamentalists, Roman Catholics, and mainline Protestants.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, Large Catechism, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959) 414.

Two theological problems attend this model. The first is whether or not God needs to be appeased by sacrifice. Is it God who needs the sacrifice of Jesus, or is it the justice of the world order? Anselm assumed it was the latter. John Calvin (1509-1564) seemed to think we human beings need “to appease God.” However, this does not mean that appeasing God elicits a love from God that had not existed before. Rather, satisfaction “derives from God’s love, therefore it has not established the latter.”<sup>2</sup> Appeasing an otherwise wrathful God simply does not belong in Christian conceptuality; because, even when sacrificial symbolism is used, the entire work of atonement is initiated by God out of God’s love for us creatures. No sacrifice and no satisfaction is necessary to change God’s mind on this count.

A second problem has been raised recently by feminist theologians. The concept of atonement, especially the satisfaction model, connotes that God the Father is a child abuser. If the notion of divine appeasement holds, then our heavenly father needs appeasing just as an earthly alcoholic father needs appeasing. The suffering of Jesus becomes a vindictive act on the part of God. Feminists denounce child abuse and wife abuse on the part of earthly fathers; and they fear that this atonement model sends a destructive message to faithful Christian families.

As we mentioned earlier, our English word ‘atonement’ is frequently used to translate the biblical *hilasterion*, which means expiation through blood atonement. Despite the imagery of blood sacrifice in the Bible, Christian theologians do not completely agree that such a thing as a mechanism of sacrifice exists; nor do they think God’s love toward us is dependent on a successful (propitiatory) sacrifice either by Jesus Christ or by us. The language of sacrifice in the New Testament is metaphorical, not literal. Jesus may have literally been a teacher, but he is metaphorically a sacrificial lamb or a Good Shepherd just as he is metaphorically a victorious warrior.

## 5. Jesus as the Happy Exchange

The satisfaction model is objective. Through his work on the cross, Jesus Christ restores the just order of the universe. Yet, we may ask, how does this objective atonement become appropriated to persons of faith? At this point we introduce a new model, *Jesus as the Happy Exchange*. Like the satisfaction model, the happy exchange involves the two natures of Christ, the human and the divine. Yet, making satisfaction is not its aim. What happens here instead is an exchange, an exchange between the human and the divine natures. This very exchange constitutes the work of salvation.

Now, get ready for some more theological words. The exchange is called the *communicatio idiomatum* in Latin, or “communication of attributes” in English. The attributes of Christ’s divinity become present in his human incarnation; and the attributes of his humanity become present in the divine life. It gets still more complicated, so ask your brain to fasten its seat belt. Are you ready? Get this: the

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.9.1.4.

communication of attributes takes place both in the person of Christ and in our individual faith.

Recall that Jesus worked miracles. He healed. Each healing embodied ahead of time the grand healing of all brokenness that we look forward to when the new creation arrives in its fullness. Jesus' resurrection on Easter is a prolepsis of your and my resurrection in the new creation. Under the conditions of temporality, Jesus exhibited the attributes of eternity. The finite human Jesus embodied the infinite divine power of God. Got it?

Now, get this. The startling and overwhelming claim Christians make is that this communication of attributes within Jesus can take place also within us, within the deep reaches of our soul. The communication becomes an exchange, so to speak, because Jesus Christ becomes present to us in our faith. Martin Luther describes this happy exchange by using the metaphor of marriage.

Faith...unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh (Eph. 5:31). And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage...it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil....Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's."<sup>3</sup>

Trace what is happening according to the happy exchange model. First, objectively, God becomes present in the person of Jesus. The incarnate Son of God is both human and divine. An exchange of attributes occurs, so that God experiences what it means to be human; and the human Jesus expresses the eternal life of God. Second, subjectively, the risen Jesus Christ is placed into the heart of the person of faith by the Holy Spirit. Christ now takes unto himself the negativities of our lives: our sins, our guilt, our subjection to suffering and death. In exchange, Christ shares with us the forgiveness of sins and the power of resurrection unto eternal life. All these divine attributes are present in, with, and under our daily mundane existence. If we are unjust, Christ bestows on us his justice. We are justified by our faith, because in faith Christ has communicated to us his divine being. This is the way we receive salvation.

Where will we find the happy exchange model? The idea of the communication of attributes goes back to the Council of Chalcedon and earlier. We will find it buried under the piles of ignored theological concepts on the dusty shelves of Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians. When Protestants dig this one up, they discover that the Lutheran and Reformed traditions disagree. The Lutherans believe that the finite can contain the infinite (*finitum capax infiniti*), whereas Reformed theologians deny that the finite can contain the infinite (*finitum non capax infiniti*). This means divine attributes cannot be received by our human nature. So, the happy exchange model of atonement is much more at

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vols. 1-30, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing Company, 1955-1967); Vols. 31-55, edited by Helmut T. Lehmann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1955-1986) 31:351.

home among Lutherans than among Presbyterians or members of the United Church of Christ.

No existing cross symbol actually conveys completely the exchange. Perhaps the Latin cross or the *Christus Rex* would fit best, because both convey what Christ's atonement accomplishes for us.

### Atonement Chart

<b>MODEL</b>	<b>Human Predicament</b>	<b>Objective Work</b>	<b>Subjective Work</b>	<b>Cross</b>
TEACHER	Ignorance	Teach the Way	Follow the Way	Greek
MORAL EXAMPLE	Ignorance	Teach God's Love	Copy Jesus & Live Ethically	Greek Red Cross
VICTORIOUS CHAMPION	Bondage to Evil	Liberation from Bondage	Accept God's Grace	Latin or <i>Christus Rex</i>
SATISFACTION	Sin & Loss of Blessedness	Satisfaction of Cosmic Justice	Accept God's Grace	Crucifix
HAPPY EXCHANGE	Sin & Loss of Blessedness	Exchange of Attributes	Exchange of Attributes	Latin or <i>Christus Rex</i>
FINAL SCAPEGOAT	Self-Justification & Scapegoating	Victimization of God's Son	Realization of Scapegoating & God's Justification	Crucifix or Armenian

## 6. Jesus as the Final Scapegoat

The book of Hebrews describes Jesus as a priest, the final priest. <sup>NRS</sup> Hebrews 2:17 "Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people." What we have here is an extended metaphor. Jesus was never literally a priest, to be sure. Yet, like a priest performing a sacrifice, the incarnate Son of God renders the final sacrifice—the sacrifice after which no future sacrifice will ever be needed—to atone for human sin and render complete the work of salvation.

In this section we will ask whether the mechanism of sacrifice exists and whether we should think of Jesus' atoning work literally as a sacrifice. Our answer will be "no" and "no." It may look like a sacrifice, to be sure. Roman Catholic priests pray during the Eucharistic liturgy that God find their sacrifice acceptable and grant us forgiveness. Theologically, Catholic priests do not intend to add a second sacrifice to that of Jesus; rather, their recitation of the mass participates in Jesus' inclusive sacrifice. Perhaps some Roman Catholic theologians treat Jesus' priesthood literally rather than metaphorically. Be that as it may, to employ the model of *Jesus as the final scapegoat* is to say "no" to all literal practices of sacrifice. In what follows we will say why.

Hidden within the practice of sacrifice is human belief in the scapegoat mechanism, a spiritual practice that unifies the social order around victimage. This applies both to visible sacrifice in ritual and invisible sacrifice in human sinning. When it comes to visible ritual sacrifice and scapegoating, we turn to the Old Testament for precedent. On the day of atonement, says the book of Leviticus, two goats will be selected. One will be slaughtered; and its blood sprinkled. The second is the scapegoat. The sins of the people will be ritually heaped upon its head. Then it will be driven out into the wilderness, bearing the sins away. <sup>NRS</sup> Leviticus 16:22 "The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region." This ritual of blood, goats, sacrifice, and bearing away sins provides symbolic background for framing the atoning work of Jesus in the New Testament. These symbols convey the meaning of the work of Christ, but just how we should interpret the meaning has become a theological puzzle.

It is a puzzle because of an invisible connection between sacrifice and sin. Sacrifice is a form sin takes. Why do we say this? Because we humans lie to ourselves. For atonement to happen, we need to unmask the lie. Jesus is the final scapegoat, because his unjust death unmasks the lie.

To scapegoat is to sacrifice someone else for our own self-preservation and self-justification. In another episode of "The Thoughtful Christian," we explain how we fallen human beings have a propensity to justify ourselves, to lie to ourselves so that we imagine ourselves to be right and good and virtuous and deserving. While telling ourselves this lie, we heap our sins on to the head of someone else. In gossip to ruin a person's reputation or political rhetoric to rally a nation for war, we project evil onto someone else so that we can feel good about ourselves in contrast. This is the practice of scapegoating. No such mechanism exists in reality whereby we can actually sacrifice an animal or an enemy who will bear our iniquities away; yet we fool ourselves into believing this in order to whitewash our own darkness. Jesus denounced us for self-justifying in this manner, using the word 'hypocrite' with frequency. <sup>NRS</sup> Matthew 23:27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth." Scapegoating and hypocrisy are like salt and pepper; we always find them together.

Jesus himself becomes a scapegoat. He is not visibly a sacrificial lamb, to be sure. The irony in the decision to crucify Jesus is that the most respected religious leaders—including the high priest—found it necessary to justify their



protection of the nation of Israel from damage by the Romans. Recall the speech of Caiaphas, the high priest, before the Council. <sup>NRS</sup> John 11:50 "You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." Caiaphas and his colleagues believed in sacrifice: the sacrifice of Jesus would save the nation. The priestly practice of sacrifice and the political practice of scapegoating merge here in the New Testament; this is a testament to human hypocrisy.

Jesus' own teaching combined with the vividly public unjustness of his execution reveals the hypocrisy and foolishness of belief in the mechanism of sacrifice, belief in the invisible practice of scapegoating. The idea of sacrifice is a product of our own vain prostitutions of the truth to justify ourselves while making others suffer. This is sin. Jesus' death reveals it as sin. Jesus is the scapegoat that reveals the lie we tell ourselves; and it renders the scapegoat mechanism lame and unusable. In principle, Jesus is the final scapegoat, because the lie no longer can fool us into believing we can justify ourselves by sacrificing others.

According to the final scapegoat model, God accepts no sacrifice from human beings, either visible ritual sacrifice or invisible scapegoating of enemies. Perhaps we can interpret the book of Hebrews to be saying that as high priest Jesus Christ has performed the final sacrifice, after which no future sacrifices will be accepted. We might also ask: has God rejected sacrifice all along? <sup>NRS</sup> Psalm 50:9 "I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds." In either case, Christians today need to eschew sacrifice at every level. Our task is to study the cross of Jesus and ask ourselves: what does this reveal to us about covering up our scapegoating with hypocritical lies? In this regard, the final scapegoat model could be considered a much more intense version of the moral example model.

The construction of the scapegoat model is new. Theologians are now considering this in light of the theory of scapegoating put forth by French literary critic, Rene Girard. Perhaps the most appropriate cross might be either the crucifix or the Armenian cross, which places the lamb in the center of a fleury version of the Jerusalem cross. This lamb is offered to us by God, not the other way around.



God does not need to be appeased. Nor does God feel compelled to respond to any of our human sacrificial offerings. Salvation is not the result of the sacrifices we offer. This is because God in Christ has performed the work of

salvation. It's done. It's been accomplished. Salvation is already ours as a free gift. All we need to do is appropriate it in faith.

What about self-sacrificial love? Such love colors the daily life of the faithful Christian like paint colors a wall. Such love is not a sacrifice we offer to God in expectation of some sort of salvific return, however. Rather, this kind of love is the very love of God breathing within our individual soul.

### **How does Jesus save us?**

Our Bible overflows with metaphors, images, and symbols that depict the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Over the centuries theologians have tried on different conceptual models to see which ones fit. We have sized up six such models here. Each one is internally coherent. Each one is biblical. None can claim a copyright for exclusive rights on what the Bible says. What do you think?

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### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

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