

Redemption Reconsidered

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THE NEW TESTAMENT knows nothing of a “Theory of Atonement.”

That Jesus’ death was an atoning sacrifice is affirmed repeatedly in the Apostolic Writings (e.g., Rom. 3:25; 1 John 2:2; Heb. 2:17). But *how* Messiah’s death and resurrection saves us from sin and reconciles us to God, and *why* the Almighty chose this method to achieve such an end is left unexplained.

The need for a logical explanation proved far more pressing to the Western, Roman mindset than to the first-century Jewish apostles. An eleventh-century philosopher named Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, proposed a doctrine of atonement that serves as the standard in Christian theology to this day. Called the “Satisfaction” theory, Anselm averred that Jesus’ death “satisfies” the honor God is due as Creator and King, a responsibility deeply breached by the sin of Adam and subsequent humankind. As our representative, Messiah dies *for* us. His sinless life and selfless sacrifice restored to God the honor and glory due His name and thereby expiates our offenses.

A variation on Anselm’s doctrine is the prevailing Protestant paradigm, called the “Penal” theory, in which the emphasis is not so much on God’s honor as His justice. Constrained by the righteous demands of His absolute justice, God cannot simply excuse humanity’s sin and rebellion. The wages of sin must be paid, the wrath of a holy God must be propitiated, so that He can act favorably toward us and forgive. In this model Jesus dies *instead* of us, as our substitute—taking upon himself the penalty for sins righteously required by Divine justice.

THEORIES BY NATURE TEND TO CIRCUMSCRIBE and thus limit the reality being defined. These theories of atonement, for example, reduce the essential saving work of Messiah to a legal transaction (justification), with the focus being the individual's sin and guilt.

The New Testament by contrast displays a more full-orbed view of atonement. It describes the multiple facets of the saving work of God in Messiah not in theories but through a series of images or motifs drawn from the Hebrew scriptures. Justification and Expiation are among them, though far from dominant. Others include: Conflict and Victory over Evil, Ransom and Liberation, Sacrifices and Suffering, Reconciliation, and Adoption into a Family.

Images evoke and invite. They are windows into which we can gaze and doors through which we can walk to explore the multidimensional mysteries of the work of God and His Spirit. When, for example, John the Baptizer declared, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), evocations of Passover and Temple Sacrifices would have resonated deeply in the hearts of his audience.

THE PASSOVER MOTIF, apropos to this season, is pregnant with implications and applications that are profoundly relevant to every believer's walk of faith. Here are three examples that receive little notice within the classical Evangelical purview.

1] Passover establishes a redemptive paradigm of grace (contra the bias that "Jews know nothing of grace only Law"). The Almighty did not send Moses to the enslaved Israelites with the Ten Commandments in hand, saying, "If you will keep these laws I will save you!" Revelation (with concomitant responsibility) *follows* redemption, and both are driven by grace.

2] Israel was saved in order to draw near and serve their Redeemer *in this world*. Redemption created a *covenant community* that would sanctify the name of the true and living God *here and now*. Evangelicalism tends to define redemption primarily as a *legal transaction*, focused almost exclusively upon the *individual*, with the goal being the *world to come*. Revelation is of secondary significance; discipleship is optional.

3] In classical Christian theories of atonement we are freed from the *wrath of God*. The core issue confronted in the original Passover however was freedom from an enslaving *evil power*. In this light reconsider Hebrews 2:14-15, that the Pioneer of our salvation partook of human nature that “through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.”

All the models of redemption and atonement imaged in the New Testament are treasures to be explored and truths to be affirmed. A fuller and more faithful image of God our Father will thereby emerge.

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