

THE ATONEMENT

By

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What really happened on the cross? Because many speculative theories of the atonement have been developed into systematic theologies, conservative preachers often hesitate to come to grips with this question.

Many are content to say, "Christ died for our sins," and leave the meaning of this to the interpretation of the hearer. To the early Christians, this was sufficient. They seemed to understand exactly what was meant and were motivated sufficiently by this good news to promote it at the risk of life and limb. Perhaps one reason it seemed clear enough to them is that the doctrines relating to it had not become encrusted with the philosophic notions and time honored traditions of men.

Today atonement theology is strong meat, a heavy subject for a generation accustomed to nothing deeper than the daily trivia dished up by the press, interspersed with comedy and super sports on Sunday. There is a general attitude toward the cross that it is too mystical, too deep; that something took place there which we are not supposed to understand. But strip away the encrustations of creeds and denominational bias and you will find that it is neither as complicated nor hard to understand as it has been made to appear.

One thing which has confused the meaning of Christ's death for sin is the strong influence of Greek philosophy of death, and life after death. Much of our Western system of politics and philosophy is derived from the Greeks. Plato is read, studied, and taught by the professors. Some of the most influential molders of thought in the Western world have admitted their indebtedness to Plato. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the subjects of life and death.

Greek concepts of life were not based on revelation from God. They held that man is a dualistic creature; physical and spiritual, the physical being only a temporary house for the spiritual which, in their view, was eternal and the only part with ultimate significance. In this context, death is something that happens only to the body. The spirit ("Soul" to the Greeks) is released from its earthly prison and instead of suffering death, actually is able to live in greater freedom and sensitivity than ever.

To hear the Greek philosophy expounded, you only have to attend the traditional funeral conducted by an orthodox preacher. "Our brother has not died," he will say, "he has entered a greater realm...received his reward...more alive than ever before." This is supposed to bring comfort to the bereaved. However, in cases where those closest to their dead kinsman have little confidence in the faith he professed, where is the comfort? There is always the stark possibility that God saw the deceased in a different light and lists him with the condemned rather than the saved. In such cases, the idea that he has not truly died, that he is "more alive than ever" can be nothing more than a terrifying thought.

At the funeral, every attempt is made to say that death is not death. The Greek philosophy prevails to say that only the body dies and that the "real person" lives on untouched by human death. In the case of one who dies without redemption, he still is not dead but is living on in a state of alienation from God. He is said to be "spiritually dead"

or “separated from God.” The poor deceased person now lives in a spirit world but totally separated from God. The wages of sin, therefore, according to the Platonic theologians, is not death of the person but eternal life, though separated from God (but God must continue to give that life!). This allows one to hold to the Greek concept of a dualistic person with a perishable body and an imperishable soul, and at the same time hold to the Bible doctrine that the sinner is to perish and suffer death (of a sort) for his sins.

But what does this say of Christ’s death? If the wages of sin is life in a state of spiritual separation from God, what does Christ’s death in the flesh have to do with it? If death, as the just penalty for sin is not the cessation of life but rather a more intense life, only separated from God, then how does Christ’s pouring out his physical blood and dying in the body pay the penalty?

The power of the Gospel is in the truth that it brings to bear upon our human predicament. But if we have no insight into that predicament, the gospel will make no sense and have no effect. To say that Christ suffered death for me by crucifixion of His body on the tree is supposed to be readily perceptible, so that I might believe that by His death my own death (for sin) is cancelled. But if my penalty for sin is other than what it means to die and lose one’s life, then how am I to correlate the death on the cross with the penalty that is due me for sin?

The whole man is made in the image of God. Man is to be Holy. The word itself demands wholeness, a complete person as he was created, spirit and body, the two together being defined in Scripture as a “living soul” (Gen. 2:7). To separate man’s components and say that only one is eternal and is to be dealt with as punishment for sin is to wrest the language from any common meaning. Furthermore it directly conflicts with the express meaning of Christ’s death.

Christ did not merely give up the flesh and then go on living, thus paying the penalty for sin by living spiritually in a condition separated from God. The Lord expressly said, “Since then the children are sharers in flesh and blood, he also Himself in like manner partook of the same; that through death He might bring to naught him that had the power of death, that is the devil” (Heb. 2:14).

Jesus became flesh and blood because He was to die the death, and the kind of death, which met the penalty for sin. Note that Peter explains, “he bore our sins in His body on the tree (I Peter 2:24). This states that the penalty He paid for our sins was in the flesh, death on the cross, and not a penalty paid after that death by living in a spiritual state separated from God.

Thus scripture presents the penalty of sin as death of the person and not the mere death of the flesh nor as spiritual death—a spirit living separated from God. In the Old Testament it is said that “The soul that sins, it shall die” (Ezek. 18:4, 20). In the New Testament, James writes, “He who converts a sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death...” (James 5:20).

The Passover lamb was slain so that the first-born male of the household would not die. Either the animal died, or the first-born died. There was nothing in this sacrifice to say anything about torture, nor to indicate spiritual suffering. This lamb was a type of Christ. “For our Passover also has been sacrificed, even Christ” (I Cor. 5:7). As the essence of the Passover was in the death of the lamb, so is it with the sacrifice of Christ.

Jesus said of it, “The Son of man came...to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Scripture does not separate Jesus into a perishable body for dying and an

imperishable soul for living on. He was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due...He poured out His soul unto death” (Isa. 53:8, 12).

Death is the problem of the whole human race. Life is forfeit because of sin. There is no place in God’s purpose for rebellious sinners. In the final state of things God will be “all in all.” There can be no life of any kind apart from God who gives and sustains all of life. He has repeatedly stated that He will punish the rebels by death, that He will clean house and destroy all the unbelievers (Matt. 3:12). Only the righteous are to inhabit the new creation (II Peter 3:13). Man in his natural state is unrighteous and has no way to regain or attain righteousness by his own faulty works. The atonement is the solution. The justice of God can be fully satisfied when death takes place for sin. God provided the “dier,” the man Jesus, who had no sin of his own for which to die. Instead, in great love and mercy, He bore our sins. “He who knew no sin He made to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (II Cor. 5:21). It was His life that He gave, not just His flesh, that we might have life rather than the final death.

In the death on the cross, Jesus was dying the death that is due to every sinner at judgment. Hence He could say, “He that hears my word and believes Him that sent Me has eternal life, and comes not into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24). That judgment took place on Golgotha.

The power of Christ’s death was not just in His separation from God, nor His intense suffering, but in the giving up of His life, as it will be for all unbelievers who are to be cast into the fire for the purpose of their destruction. That lake of fire, which Jesus referred to as “Gehenna,” is not presented as a place for sinners to live, as thought by so many who are influenced indirectly by Platonic philosophy. The fire is not an end in itself but rather a means to an end. Just as God used water to destroy the generation of Noah, He has promised to use fire to destroy all the unbelieving in judgment (II Peter 3:7–12, Jude 7).

The Christian faith, therefore, is a matter of life and death. All have sinned (Rom. 3:23) and the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). This is the inexorable law of God and it will be applied in the Day of Judgment. By Christ assuming our sin, and suffering its penalty, the law has already been exercised on behalf of Christians, “that (we) should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

This is not the end of the story. It would have been gross injustice for the Almighty to have punished an innocent person against his will. But Christ voluntarily laid down His life in our place, in obedience to the Father, for which God raised Him up and honored Him with the highest position in all of creation; so that through time and eternity His praises will be sung by all creatures.

Even now His act is the basis of hope for every Christian, the heart of the church and the theme of all the redeemed, that “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

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