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Research Paper:

The Atonement of Jesus Christ: Once and for all

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Although the Old Testament sacrifices come to mind, for me, the doctrine of the atonement is inextricably linked with images of the crucifixion, the blood of Christ being shed, and the cry from the cross, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The whole scene culminates with the last breath of his life being poured out for the salvation of humanity in a triumphant, “It is finished.”

At first consideration, there are so many avenues of the person and work of Jesus Christ to consider when exploring the act of atonement—too many in fact to include in this brief work. What is the significance of atonement for Christianity and what is the meaning of this sacrificial work we celebrate? Academically, atonement is defined as, “The death of Jesus Christ on the cross, which effects salvation as the reestablishment of the relationship between God and sinners.”

Although we will begin by laying a foundational understanding of the doctrine of atonement, we will not limit our discussion solely to an academic explanation of the features of the work of Christ in the act of atonement. Instead, we will focus on the relational aspects of the atonement in an attempt to discern

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1 Matthew 27:46 New International Version
2 John 19:30 NIV
the significance of the atonement from the view of what is accomplished in relation to fallen humanity. We will also focus on Jesus Christ as both sacrifice and high priest as revealed in the book of Hebrews. Finally, we will pursue a discussion of the atonement which will center on total sufficiency and universal availability of Christ’s work as well as the superior nature of his sacrifice and the new covenant which is, in every way, “better.”

I. A Foundational Understanding of the Doctrine of Atonement

Although most Christians have heard the gospel story preached and have studied the crucifixion story in Sunday school, it cannot necessarily be assumed that everyone understands the nature and work of the cross in the same way. It is not uncommon to have been presented with the view that Jesus Christ saved us from the wrath of an angry God—who was bound by his righteous nature to punish humanity for its sin—suffering the punishment and wrath that we rightly deserved. Is this true? Yes, but while there is scriptural evidence to support that view, this is not the whole story (ex: Rom 5:9, Eph 2:3, 1 Th 1:10). The question remains, is the traditional understanding of the atonement an accurate portrayal of the message of the atonement? Depending on who you ask, the question is more easily asked than answered. The simplest way of finding a balanced view might be found by first glancing back at the Old Testament account of the Day of Atonement.
The Day of Atonement came once a year and was a day on which the high priest offered a sacrifice for his sins as well as that of the people of Israel. The problem was that the sacrifices were only a means of purifying the flesh and could do nothing to purify the conscience. (Hebrews 9:9-10) “In fact, these sacrifices are reminders of sins (v.3). There was a need, then, for a better sacrifice (9:23) because ‘it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins’ (10:4).”

The ongoing quest for the most suitable image or theory by which to understand the atonement. This aged quest has always been complicated by the fact that the New Testament itself offers a wide variety of images to explain the atonement. John Driver has noted no less than ten motifs around which the New Testament atonement images can be clustered: conflict/victory/liberation; vicarious suffering; archetypal (i.e., representative man, pioneer, forerunner, firstborn); martyr; sacrifice; expiation/wrath of God; redemption; reconciliation; justification; and adoption-family.

In the west, the most prominent of the theories listed seems to be that of Penal Substitution. We often hear this view preached vehemently during the

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4 William Lane explains that, “On the Day of Atonement the Levitical high priest had to offer a sacrifice first for his own sins, and then he presented an offering for the sins of the people. In fact, his sin offering was a young bull (Lev. 16:6, 11-14); the sin offering for the people was a goat (Lev. 16:15). Accordingly, once each year the high priest had to acknowledge that he was implicated in the defilement of sin which characterized all the people of God, as he offered sacrifice first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. But God’s Son was not like the Levitical high priests. He did not have to offer a sin offering for his own sin (7:27a) because he was “devout, guileless, and undefiled” (7:26). Precisely for that reason he was qualified to offer the definitive sacrifice on behalf of those whom he represented. The preacher declares emphatically, “He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself” (7:27b). His unique offering of himself put an end to the whole Levitical system of sacrifices because he secured completed atonement.” Lane, William L. 1985 Hebrews: A call to commitment. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 115.


Easter season and is the subject of passion plays, movies, and gruesome explanations of the punishment and pain which Jesus endured on the cross so that we could go free. The dominant theme is always that Jesus died for our sins, paying the penalty for us, to satisfy the wrath or anger of God who cannot abide sin, but who nevertheless wants to save us from eternal damnation.  

Note that the emphasis here in Hebrews, which is a reflection backward to the Old Testament events, appears to be more concerned with the relational problem of “defilement” and hindrances to worship, or it could be said, hindrances to God’s people interacting with him. Again we look to the emphasis found in the writer’s words and hear a positive tone in the message of atonement that does not center on God’s “wrath”, but on the relational work being accomplished. “When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here...” italics added (Heb 9:11). “All the sacrifices of the old covenant were able to provide only an external and symbolic removal of defilement. Their primary importance lay in the witness they bore to the fact that a state of defilement is a hindrance to worship.”

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7 "At the heart of the biblical doctrine of atonement is the idea of penal substitution. What do we mean by that? First, when we talk of its being penal, we mean that Christ endured punishment. A penalty (Latin poena) was inflicted on him. The obvious questions that arise from this claim relate to the nature of the penalty and the one who exacts it. In the first place, God’s law has been broken and sin has been committed against him. God is the one who prescribes the penalty and exacts it. Secondly, the penalty God laid down for sin is death, exclusion from fellowship with him for ever. For human beings, this means eternal punishment (Mt. 25:46), since if the life which the righteous enjoy is eternal (and everlasting duration is part and parcel of what that implies, for in what other categories can we understand eternal life?), the torment to be faced can hardly be anything else since the same words are used in the selfsame context. Secondly, when we say ‘substitution’ we mean that Christ endured this penalty in our place. Therefore, Christ himself willingly submitted to the just penalty which we deserved, receiving it on our behalf and in our place so that we will not have to bear it ourselves.” Letham, Robert. 1993. The Work of Christ: Contours of Christian Theology. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 132-3.

8 Lane, 122.
Although, without a doubt, the sacrifice of Christ saved humanity from the wrath of God, again, note the tenor of the writer’s words as he continues to explain how the work of Christ opens the door for expressions of the devotion and worship of humanity.

“The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” Hebrews 10:1-4 *italics added*

Of course, this is only one perspective on the work of the atonement, yet it highlights the framework of this paper in which I am seeking to build on the relational aspects of Christ’s atoning work.

It is noteworthy that there has never been a single “official” doctrine of the Atonement approved by church council or creed; rather, what we find are many different attempts to view the cross of Jesus from differing angles and from within different historical and social contexts. Nevertheless, there has been a common thread running through the Church’s understanding of Christ’s atonement (“at-one-men,” being in accord): sin breaks relationship with God, but His love, a reconciling and forgiving love, restores the possibility or capacity for relationship.⁹

**II. The Significance of Christ’s Atonement**

It is important to understand what Christ did for humanity if we are to go beyond the “saved from punishment” theme and develop an appreciation for the relationship factor inherent in the doctrine of the atonement. Before going any

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further, it is also noteworthy to clarify that at no time was God alienated from the world or humanity. If this had been the case then God would never had drawn near to his creation in the act of redemption. On the contrary, God has never distanced himself from his creation, but has continued to pursue humanity for the purpose of restoring the lost relationship when humanity strayed. Let us be clear, “The world had to be reconciled to God—not God to the world.”

In fact, it is God’s pursuit of a relationship with humanity—not because he needed humanity, but because he loved his creation—that caused him to be willing to pay such a costly price for our redemption. This truly divine concern for his creation is the motivation for the giving of his “one and only son” (Jn 3:16). The incarnation of Jesus Christ was deemed necessary, not only because the cross was God’s chosen means of sacrifice, but because of God’s relational connection with humanity. God was not merely accomplishing a divine judicial purpose—he cared—and Jesus revealed how much he cared.


11 According to Oden, “What happened on the cross is not the death of a good man only, but the death of God the Son who comes to us in mission to reconcile the Father to us. Only one who was truly human could become the representative of humanity before God the Father. Only one who was truly God could offer a fitting sacrifice for the sins of all humanity. From the self-offering of this unique theandric person comes “the perfect redemption, propitiation and satisfaction.” It is entirely adequate to save from sin. It is a perfect and complete sacrifice, a wholly sufficient conciliation of the divine rejection of sin, and satisfaction of divine justice. We are mercifully clothed in the Son’s own righteousness. God’s holiness at the heavenly throne is met by God’s love on the cross so that sinners can be reconciled to God by the holy love of God.” Oden, Thomas C., and Robert D. Wood, eds. 1994. John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity: A plain exposition of his teaching on Christian doctrine. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 183.
Although the death of Christ is synonymous with the atonement, the atonement is more than a substitutionary death or the price paid by him for our guilt as he died in our place. “His death was first and foremost a matter of solidarity with those sisters and brothers for whom he serves as priest. In sharing the fate of death with them, he was able to destroy the power of death and free those enslaved to the fear of death” (Heb 2:14-15.)

Daniel L. Migliore observes, “It is interesting that in many third-world countries the atonement means more than that Jesus died for them or in their stead, satisfying the righteousness of God, their emphasis is Christ’s “solidarity” with “the poor, the abused, and the suffering.” It is in this “solidarity” or commonality which Jesus Christ shares with humanity that we find one of the greatest hopes of the gospel. It is the inextinguishable hope and realization that God cares and understands the human predicament.

As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, “For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

Christ’s work is significant in this sense because it made possible a tangible extension of God’s grace that had the power to transform human lives.

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14 Hebrews 9:17-18 NIV
through supplying concrete hope of true reconciliation with the Creator by a means not dependent on the frailty of human character or actions.

Now, because of the universal availability of the benefits of Christ’s work the, “New Testament atonement theology accords privilege to no one group over another. What happened on the cross was of universal significance—in the language of the day, for Jew, for slave, and free, for male and female. The cross was the expression of God’s grace for all, for all persons as well as for all creation.”

This was a great victory for humanity as a whole which was won through Jesus Christ. The possibility of reconciliation with God left the confines of any national, racial, or social barriers and, through the manifestation of God’s love the walls of separation were broken down (Eph 2:14-18).

### III. A Superior Sacrifice for a New and Living Way

Hollis Gause writes, “Christ is the ordained of God for purposes of redemption; He is the only One ordained of God for this purpose.” It is the total sufficiency and the superior nature of his sacrifice which makes his sacrifice and the new covenant he provides, in every way, superior. As the writer of Hebrews explains, “When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the

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15 Green and Baker, 113.

blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.”  

As we can see, there is much more to the sacrificial work of Christ than that of bearing our punishment on the cross. To begin with, there is the shedding of his blood that has made his entrance into the heavenly sanctuary possible. It is there, operating in the office of our “great high priest” (Heb 4:14) that he secures our redemption and complete cleansing by offering his own blood on the mercy seat. “In His Person, He is the atonement—the covering. In His work He accomplishes the terms necessary to satisfy the judgment of God against the sinner.”

In 9:11-14 Christ offered himself as an unblemished sacrifice to God and entered the heavenly sanctuary to complete his priestly ministry in the presence of God (vv. 13-14). The emphasis falls upon Christ whose death was the offering of himself in obedience to God. In short, Christ is both high priest and sacrifice.

This significant unit (9:11-14) is introduced on a note of strong contrast with the description of the Levitical arrangement reviewed in 9:1-10: “But when Christ appeared as high priest of the good things that have now come...he entered once for all into the real sanctuary, thus obtaining eternal redemption” (cc. 11-12a).

Previously, humanity could only hope to be “ceremonially” clean or outwardly clean (Heb 9:13), but now, through Christ and his superior sacrifice,

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17 Hebrews 9:11-12 NIV
18 Gause, 55.
19 Lane, 121.
there comes complete cleansing for humanity.\textsuperscript{20} It was this quality of his person and of his action and his alone that qualified him to enter the Most Holy Place (Heb 9:12) and also made the way for us to enter into the Most Holy Place (Heb 10:19). Based on this declaration we embrace the admonition of, “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”\textsuperscript{21} The work is his alone and he is worthy of the glory—worthy to have and place of exaltation and his name exalted above all others (Philippians 2:9-11).

The whole of that work can be seen as a bridging of gulfs, a removal of estrangements, a restoration of unity. But in the narrower sense the Atonement means some particular part (the crucial part) of the work of Christ, that part without which the whole work of reconciliation would not be possible. It is not merely that Christ has reconciled man and God; He has done something to reconcile them.\textsuperscript{22}

He suffered for all humanity, bore our punishment, paid the price of our sins for us. Thus we have nothing to offer God but the merits of Christ.\textsuperscript{23} Through his work we stand, not on our own merits. This is satisfying to a large degree because there is something more, something better, than all the righteousness humanity can muster—it is the righteousness of Christ our Lord.

\textsuperscript{20} Lane explains, “The reason that Christ is able to achieve what the old sacrifices could never accomplish is that “he offered himself through the eternal Spirit as an unblemished sacrifice to God” (v. 14). The effectiveness of the blood of Christ derives from the qualitatively superior character of his sacrifice.” Lane, 123.

\textsuperscript{21} Hebrews 10:22 NIV


\textsuperscript{23} Oden, 187.
IV. Jesus’ Heavenly Ministry as Sacrifice and High Priest

The significance of the atonement, from the view of what is accomplished in relation to fallen humanity, cannot be separated from the work of Christ as both sacrifice and high priest as revealed in the book of Hebrews. As a superior sacrifice, Jesus replaced all inferior sacrifices which were unable to accomplish the work God wanted most—reconciliation of sinful humanity to himself. It is important to note that, “The cross was not necessary to change God’s attitude toward human beings. Rather, it is the culmination of a life totally dedicated to God and God’s reign.”24 “And when Christ suffers upon the cross, the earthly veil is miraculously and suddenly torn by powerful forces so that any heart that has a mind to believe might be forever assured that now, absolutely no barrier exists between God and His people.”25

As a superior high priest Jesus replaced the earthly order of priest, who through human frailty was limited in both human condition and earthly existence.

“Christ’s high priesthood is shown to be superior because the old covenant required many priests, since ‘they were prevented by death from continuing in office’ (Heb 7:23). In contrast, the new covenant provides one high priest who lives forever and ‘is able for all time to save those who approach God through him’ (vv.24-25). Therefore, the transition from the old to the new covenant implies transition from many to one priest.”26

24 Migliore, 202.


Unlike the earthly priests, Christ who is our superior high priest went in before God with a pure heart and with his blood which was sufficient to affect a permanent cleansing. Thus he offered his better sacrifice in the true sanctuary, in the presence of God. The writer of Hebrews explains,

> It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. Hebrews 9:23-28

The sanctuary in which Christ has offered His atoning sacrifice is not one “made with hands” but “greater” and “more perfect...not of this creation.” The sanctuary of Christ’s atoning ministry is a heavenly one, in the very presence of God. He offers Himself before the eternal mercy seat.”

The significance of his heavenly ministry is found in the unique qualities of his priestly work. In Christ we see an understanding of the qualities of the

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27 Lane offers this insight, “In Hebrews, the function of the conscience is not to discriminate between right and wrong but to remember the sin that separates a worshiper from God. It exposed the truth that defilement extends to the heart as well as to the body, and that it erects a barrier to the living God. The inability of the gifts and sacrifices offered on the Day of Atonement and through the daily sacrifices to achieve a decisive cleansing of the conscience was, therefore, a serious weakness. Moreover, this deficiency affected all of the worshipers—priests and people alike. The fact that the most solemn ceremonies of the old covenant, those of the annual Day of Atonement, had to be repeated every year demonstrated that the sacrifices which were offered could not achieve a permanent cleansing.” 118-119.

28 Evans, 162.
human condition and the superior qualities of a high priest which is unencumbered by human limitations, while at the same time he provides the perfect sacrifice for sin in the offering of himself. This was accomplished through his obedience in all things pertaining to the will of the Father (Heb 5:7-9). “He had to endure life as a suffering human before he could be eternal high priest. As high priest, Jesus offers permanent forgiveness of sins, but only to those who follow him on this journey of obedience and suffering.”

V. The Universal Sufficiency of Christ’s Sacrifice

As we have said earlier concerning the superior nature of Christ’s atonement, this atonement provided through Jesus Christ is in no way limited in effectiveness as were the sacrifices under the old covenant. The writer of Hebrews makes that clear when he states that Christ “has appeared once for all” signifying both the efficacy and the universality of his sacrifice.

The author emphasizes the singularity of this offering in contrast to the continual offering of the earthly priests. ONCE, never before, never again. ONCE, at the completion of the age Christ offered His own blood in an act of eternal and sensitive love. That is how much He and the One who sent Him loved us. No price was too much, so He paid the maximum; never could there be any doubt or question about the sufficiency of the payment.

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30 Hebrews 9:26 NIV

31 Evans, 162.
Also, as we have briefly mentioned before, the atonement of Christ is in no way limited in relation to those who may partake. “God desires all people to be reconciled to himself. The atoning work of God in Christ is, therefore, unlimited, meaning not that it has unlimited power (for its power is limited by our response to God), but that it is unlimited in its extent (for it is for all people). Christ lived, died, and lives for all.”³²

In addition, the atonement of Jesus Christ is not limited in relation to the depth of sinful condition of those who trust in Christ. “The Son’s atonement is addressed to and sufficient for every individual sinner who shares in the tragic history of sin.”³³

What is being said in the statement that he “appeared once and for all”? It is the joyful declaration that humanity’s search for a savior, for forgiveness, for cleansing, and for a means of having a relationship with God ends with Jesus Christ. According to the writer of Hebrews, “Jesus’ sacrifice makes confident

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³² Lodahl, 186.
³³ Oden, 181.
access to the presence of God itself possible; first for himself, then for us (9:11-14; 10:19-21).”

34 He is totally sufficient.

Conclusion

As real as the wrath of God is and as true as the facts are that Jesus died in my place to save me from eternal damnation, the redemptive picture found in Hebrews of relational healing between God and humanity is more comprehensible to me. I know little of suffering such as Jesus endured and I know even less about the torments of hell that I have been spared. What I do understand is alienation, relational need, human weakness, and like predicaments.

My point is that a theme which centers on humanity’s rescue from the wrath of God, may present an unwanted picture of God’s intention for some and a completely foreign concept to others. Whatever the case this aspect of the atonement story is definitely not the complete story behind the work of the atonement. It is not that I have reservations about preaching the penal

34 Cortez, 545.

35 “What is implied in v. 25 is made explicit here. ‘Then’ is perhaps not the best translation of epei, which, as often, introduces an elliptical construction, with a meaning like ‘for [if it were different]’ or, as BAG (s.v.) puts it, ‘for otherwise he would have had to suffer many times.’ Again, the implication is that there is no other way of dealing with sin than Christ’s own offering of himself. If his one offering was not enough, he would have had to suffer over and over. ‘Suffer,’ of course, is used in the sense of ‘suffer death.’ The reference to ‘creation’ carries the idea right back to the beginning. No one would ever have been saved without the offering made by Christ.

‘Now’ (nyni) is not temporal; this is an example of its use ‘introducing the real situation after an unreal conditional clause or sentence, but, as a matter of fact’ (BAG, s.v.). Once again the author emphasizes the decisive quality of Christ’s sacrifice with his ‘once for all.’ It matters a great deal to the author that Christ made the definitive offering and that now that it has been made there is no place for another.” Gaebelien, Frank E. ed. 1989-1998. Expositor’s Bible Commentary. Zondervan Reference Software [CD-Rom] Version 2.6. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Corporation.
substitution theory of the atonement, I see its value. I am happy that I am not in hell and that I do not have to suffer the anger of a righteous God, but I honestly know little of what I have been spared in that sense.

Instead, I find my rejoicing flowing from the more tangible area of what I have experienced. It is the daily experiences of his grace being meted out in the supplying of my spiritual and emotional needs. It is the confidence that I know when I call out in prayer.

Again I return to the writer of Hebrews once more for the words which encapsulate the assurance and hope provided through the atonement of Jesus Christ. He writes, “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”36 After all, in the end, assurance and hope seem to be two of the most tangible of all God’s gifts.

36 Hebrews 4:16 NIV
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