

Theology Chart: Atonement

| | Ransom from Satan Theory | Commercial Theory | Penal Substitution Theory |
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| Summary | <i>Satanward.</i> Christ offered himself as the ransom payment to Satan, obtaining release for man. ¹ (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45; 1 Tim 2:6; 1 Cor 6:20) | <i>Godward.</i> Christ died to effect the restoration of God's honor and the satisfaction of his justice. The God-man paid what man could not pay. ² | <i>Godward.</i> The atonement was a judicial punishment of man's sin suffered by Christ vicariously in man's place. (Gal 3:13; Rom 8:3; 2 Cor 5:21) |
| Authors | Irenaeus (~120-200) Origen (185-254) | Anselm (1033-1109) | John Calvin (1509-1564) Charles Hodge (1797-1878) |
| Background | The model was the first theory on the atonement, taught by the Church Fathers as interpretation of Scripture. ³ | Anselm argued against the Ransom-to-Satan model since Satan has no right to punish man. ⁴ | In times of numerical church growth Hodge pointed to Christ the mediator and only way to God. ⁵ |

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| Presuppositions | Sin is represented as man's bondage under Satan, thus man needed release at the cost of a ransom. ⁶ | Man is obliged to honor God, but he is born in sin. ⁷ Sin is to disobey and withhold the honor due to him. ⁸ | Imputation of Adam's sin parallels the imputation of Christ's righteousness. ⁹ (Rom 5:12-15) |
| Necessity | The atonement was the necessary ransom to release mankind. | The atonement was necessary to satisfy God's honor. ¹⁰ Only the God-man Jesus could pay man's debt. ¹¹ | Because of God's holiness and justice, sin must be punished, hence the atonement was necessary. ¹² |
| Intention | In result, <i>all</i> mankind was released. ¹³ | The atonement is <i>provisional</i> , making salvation available to all men. ¹⁴ | The atonement is <i>effective</i> for those who are <i>elected</i> in Christ. ¹⁵ |
| Comparison | The ransom was paid to Satan, but Anselm and later the reformers said that it was paid to God. ¹⁶ | Anselm taught God's "satisfaction or wrath", the reformers taught God's punishment of "Christ or man." ¹⁷ | Vicarious suffering and justification external to oneself but 'in Christ' is the core of the true gospel. ¹⁸ |

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| Objections | The idea of bondage under Satan diminishes the seriousness of personal sin and man's responsibility. ¹⁹ | Satisfaction is not an <i>alternative</i> to punishment, but has been achieved <i>through</i> punishment in Jesus. ²⁰ | Sin and righteousness cannot be transferred from one person to another (imputation). ²¹ |
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| | Example Theory | Moral Influence Theory | Governmental Theory |
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| Summary | <i>Manward.</i> Christ set an example for man to follow (Jn 13:15; 1 Pet 2:21). He inspires and incites man to repent and obey and so shows the way of salvation based on God's favour. ²² | <i>Manward.</i> The atonement shows God's love to man and so draws him to repentance and the love of God. ²³ Man is made free to change that he no longer deserves punishment. ²⁴ | <i>Godward.</i> The atonement shows God's displeasure about sin, effects deterrence, sustains his moral government of the world and on this ground offers salvation to man. ²⁵ |
| Authors | Pelagius (350-425) Faustus Socinus (1539-1604) | Peter Abelard (1079-1142) Horace Bushnell (1802-1876) | Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) Nathaniel W. Taylor (1786-1858) |

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| Background | Pelagius' emphasis was on moral conduct. Corruption of nature would diminish responsibility. ²⁶ | The emphasis is on man's responsibility, not the devil's power. Man is the offender, not the seducer. ²⁷ | Grotius taught his doctrine against Faustus Socinus, ²⁸ and Taylor argued against Charles Hodge. ²⁹ |
| Presuppositions | Man possesses all qualities not to sin but to follow Jesus' example. ³⁰ God's nature does not require the punishment of sin. ³¹ | Sin is regarded as the free and wilful action against God. ³² God gives man the power to improve morally. ³³ | Sin is in the personal action of man. ³⁴ God is not bound by his nature and laws but free to forgive. ³⁵ |
| Necessity | God is sovereign to forgive without the atonement, ³⁶ and man is able to work out his own salvation. ³⁷ | Atonement was not a necessary ransom for God's satisfaction but a free declaration of God's love. ³⁸ | The atonement was necessary only as a declaration of God's moral government, not as retribution. ³⁹ |
| Intention | The atonement was merely part of Jesus' life as example. ⁴⁰ | Atonement is provisional for those who will accept it by faith. ⁴¹ | The atonement offers salvation to men who exercise faith. ⁴² |

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| Comparison | Adam's sin was a bad example but was not transmitted. Every man is born with a free will like Adam. ⁴³ | Atonement merely as penalty for sin is not enough but requires man's change to be effective. ⁴⁴ | Imputation of sin and righteousness is against the moral law. Punishment of the innocent Christ is immoral. ⁴⁵ |
| Objections | Remission of sin is only by the satisfaction of the law and the shedding of blood, not by God's optional will. ⁴⁶ (Hebr 9:22) Man does not have a free will but a depraved nature. ⁴⁷ | The love of God is put forth at the expense of his holiness. (Jam 2:10) The healthy receive salvation though the sinner needs it. ⁴⁸ (Mt 9:12) | Deterrence is not the object of punishment but retribution. ⁴⁹ God's law and penalty derives from his being that requires justice. ⁵⁰ |

Essay: Penal Substitution Theory

The penal substitution theory of the atonement became widely accepted among evangelicals since the reformation.¹ Anselm's preceding work *Cur Deus Homo* had to be amended insofar that God's satisfaction, and in result also man's salvation, is achieved only through vicarious suffering and the punishment of sin in Christ. Anselm rather neglected the penal character of Christ's sacrificial death. Whereas he stressed that God's honor (more than his justice) was satisfied by the death of His Son somewhat detached from the individual's sin, the reformers showed that God due to his holiness and justice was satisfied only by its just and necessary punishment.² In sum, the believer can be assured that Christ died in his stead, but the unbeliever has no such substitute. The doctrine of salvation external to man but only 'in Christ' is central to the atonement theory since the 16th century. The present essay will provide an outline along its most important aspects of *love, necessity, obedience, sacrifice, propitiation, reconciliation, redemption, and substitution.*

¹ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 196; Louis Berkhof, *Vicarious Atonement through Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1936), 26.

² John D. Hannah, "Anselm on the Doctrine of Atonement," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (1978): 342f.

Love. The atonement is the revelation and provision of God's love for the world.³ (Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8; 1 Jn 4:9f.) Divine love was the motivating force behind Christ's atoning death for sinners. He died voluntarily to save man out of love for him. No distinction should be made here between the love of the Son (Jn 15:13; Eph 5:25) and the love of the Father (Rom 8:32) since both are God.⁴

Necessity. While "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8), He is also holy and just and full of wrath "against all godliness and wickedness of men." (Rom 1:18) Christ died out of love *because* of God's wrath against sin. The necessity of the atonement thus derives from God's nature. God cannot contradict Himself (2 Tim 2:13; Hebr 6:18), hence "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." (Hebr 9:22) Taken the law as the "unchanging character of God"⁵, death is the inevitable consequence of sin (Gen 2:17; Rom 6:23) and therefore the penal substitutionary atonement absolutely necessary for the salvation of man. There was no other cup to drink for Jesus. (Mt 26:39) Above all, the justice of God has to be maintained.⁶ (Rom 3:25f.) The atonement has forensic character.⁷

³ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 465.

⁴ Ibid.; Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 142.

⁵ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, 196.

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Vicarious Atonement through Christ*, 50; Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 127.

⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Vicarious Atonement through Christ*, 59-65.

Obedience. The nature of the atonement comprises the active and passive obedience of Christ. For man's salvation based on righteousness, the requirements of God's law had to be met, and Christ did come "to fulfil them." (Mt 5:17; cf. Hebr 4:15) Christ's passive obedience was His submission under the legal punishment that He did not deserve but suffered in man's stead.⁸

Sacrifice. The death of Christ was sacrificial.⁹ It is by the blood of Christ that man is justified. (Rom 5:9) Christ is the Lamb of God as foreshadowed in the Old Testament. (Jn 1:29; 1 Cor 5:7) His blood was offered to expiate the sin of man. (Hebr 9:28; cf. 9:7) Another picture of this truth is the live goat that carried away the sins of Israel on the Day of Atonement.¹⁰ (Lev 16:20-22)

Propitiation. The atonement is also appeasing God's wrath on man. (Rom 3:25; Hebr 2:17; 1 Jn 2:2; 4:10) Men "were by nature objects of wrath." (Eph 2:3) The love of God is only enhanced in view of His wrath against the sinner. (Rom 2:5) God so loves the sinner that He is willing to save him from His wrath by way of atonement. Christ bore our sins and so he bore its judgment. (1 Pet 2:24) In His sufferings and death Christ Himself became the object of God's wrath in man's place and for man's salvation.¹¹ (1 Thess 5:9f.)

⁸ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 130; Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, 199.

⁹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 466f.

¹⁰ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 139.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 140; George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 473; Louis Berkhof, *Vicarious Atonement through Christ*, 99.

Reconciliation. Since God is propitiated, we are no longer God's enemies but reconciled to God. (Rom 5:10) The direction is from man to God and not the reverse.¹² God reconciles us to Himself in Christ. (2 Cor 5:18f.; Eph 2:16)

Redemption. From a different angle, the atonement brings the redemption of man from his bondage to sin and Satan. The atonement is taught in terms of 'ransom' (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45; 1 Tim 2:6) or 'price' (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23) paid to redeem man. The ransom price was the blood of Christ. (Eph 1:7; Col 1:14; 1 Pet 1:18f.) It was paid to God for man's release and is thus substitutionary in character.¹³

Substitution. Central to the doctrine of atonement is the aspect of penal substitution. The essential nature of the atonement is that Christ died in substitution for man. The penalty of sin was not borne by man who deserved it but by Christ the innocent. He was the perfect sacrifice who first fulfilled the law and then took the punishment of sin in man's place. As Berkhof put it, "Christ in his atoning work took the place of the sinner and as his vicar or substitute bore the penalty of sin and met the requirements of the covenant of works."¹⁴ The righteousness of Christ was then imputed to the believer for his salvation. (Rom 5:12-15.19; 2 Cor 5:21)

¹² Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 146; Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, 198.

¹³ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 149; George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 476; Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, 200.

¹⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Vicarious Atonement through Christ*, 109.

The doctrine of vicarious, substitutionary atonement is clearly taught in Scripture when it explicitly says that Christ died ‘for us.’ (Rom 5:8; 8:32; 2 Cor 5:14; Gal 3:13; Eph 5:2; 1 Thess 5:10; 1 Pet 3:18) Yet such ‘substitution’ should not be confused with merely being man’s ‘representative’. Christ was punished in man’s stead and on this basis man is declared free from the punishment he deserved.¹⁵ As long as this substitutionary nature of the atonement is not recognized, Christ did not take the punishment but man still awaits it.

Along the above discussed elements the theory forms a consistent biblical doctrine. The substitutionary character of the atonement is seen from the different perspectives of Christ’s obedience, His sacrificial death and His being a ransom for man. Christ fulfilled the law and sacrificed Himself for man and so paid the price to redeem him. Salvation is external to man and found only in Christ.

The argument of rival theories that God is sovereign and therefore could have forgiven sin freely and without the atonement is based on a misconception about the nature and character of God as revealed in his law. Others dismiss the penal character of Christ’s death and construct their theories somewhat in defence of God and His moral government. God does not need an advocate but man. Christ became the mediator and high priest of man, who offered Himself out of love for him. (Hebr 5:1; 9:11-15)

¹⁵ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 468f.; Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, 199.

Extent. It remains to be said that one has to avoid the trap of universalism. For whom exactly did Christ die? If Christ actually is the substitute for all mankind, then all mankind is saved in result.¹⁶ Yet the Bible teaches that people will be lost. (Jn 3:18) The reformers widely agreed that the atonement was (not provisional but) effective only for the elect. Christ died for His people. (Mt 1:21; cf. Jn 17:9) The doctrine of election thus supplements and completes the doctrine of atonement.¹⁷

¹⁶ A weakness in the theology of Karl Barth; see Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 171.

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 229ff.; Louis Berkhof, *Vicarious Atonement through Christ*, 156ff.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ Willem J. van Asselt, "Christ's Atonement: A Multi-Dimensional Approach," *Calvin Theological Journal* 38 (2003): 55f.
- ² John D. Hannah, "Anselm on the Doctrine of Atonement," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (1978): 336f.
- ³ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Atonement" by W.H. Kent; available from <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen>>; Internet (accessed 11 September 2008).
- ⁴ Sam Storms, "Anselm," *Enjoying God Ministries*; home page on-line, chap. A.4; available from <<http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/studies/historical-theology/>>; Internet (accessed 09 September 2008).
- ⁵ David F. Wells, "The Debate over the Atonement in 19th-Century America, Part 2," 575:249.
- ⁶ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 161; *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Atonement" by W.H. Kent.
- ⁷ John D. Hannah, "Anselm on the Doctrine of Atonement," 335.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 334; Sam Storms, "Anselm," chap. A.1 and B.1.
- ⁹ David F. Wells, "The Debate over the Atonement in 19th-Century America, Part 2 and 3," 575:251, 576:368.
- ¹⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Vicarious Atonement through Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1936), 14 and 25; cf. John D. Hannah, "Anselm on the Doctrine of Atonement," 335 and 344.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 336; Sam Storms, "Anselm," chap. B.3 and B.6.
- ¹² Louis Berkhof, *Vicarious Atonement through Christ*, 50; Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 127; David F. Wells, "The Debate over the Atonement in 19th-Century America, Part 3," 576:365.
- ¹³ Louis Berkhof, *History of Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996), 166.
- ¹⁴ John D. Hannah, "Anselm on the Doctrine of Atonement," 338.
- ¹⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 544-562; Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 229ff.; Louis Berkhof, *Vicarious Atonement through Christ*, 156ff.
- ¹⁶ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 162 and 164.
- ¹⁷ John D. Hannah, "Anselm on the Doctrine of Atonement," 343; Willem J. van Asselt, "Christ's Atonement," 60.
- ¹⁸ "Recent Doctrinal and Ecclesiastical Conflicts in Connecticut," *The Princeton Review* 25 (1853), 619; available from <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/acf4325.1-25.004>>; Internet (accessed 12 September 2008).

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- ¹⁹ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 163; Sam Storms, “Anselm,” D.1.
- ²⁰ John D. Hannah, “Anselm on the Doctrine of Atonement,” 341f.; Sam Storms, “Anselm,” chap. C.5.
- ²¹ David F. Wells, “The Debate over the Atonement in 19th-Century America, Part 3,” 576:369f.
- ²² Sam Storms, “Socinianism,” *Enjoying God Ministries*; home page on-line, chap. B; available from <<http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/studies/historical-theology/>>; Internet (accessed 09 September 2008).
- ²³ David F. Wells, “The Debate over the Atonement in 19th-Century America, Part 3,” 576:375.
- ²⁴ John Suggit, “Freedom to Be: Peter Abelard’s Doctrine of the Atonement,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 8 (1974): 34.
- ²⁵ David F. Wells, “The Debate over the Atonement in 19th-Century America, Part 2,” 575:251; Sam Storms, “Grotius and the Governmental Theory of the Atonement,” *Enjoying God Ministries*; home page on-line, chap. D; available from <<http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/studies/historical-theology/>>; Internet (accessed 09 September 2008).
- ²⁶ Sam Storms, “Augustine-Pelagius,” *Enjoying God Ministries*; home page on-line, part 1, s.v. “Pelagius”, chap. C; available from <<http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/studies/historical-theology/>>; Internet (accessed 09 September 2008).
- ²⁷ John Suggit, “Freedom to Be,” 35.
- ²⁸ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 167; Sam Storms, “Grotius and the Governmental Theory of the Atonement,” introduction.
- ²⁹ David F. Wells, “The Debate over the Atonement in 19th-Century America, Part 2,” 575:251.
- ³⁰ Sam Storms, “Augustine-Pelagius,” part 1, s.v. “Pelagius”, chap. C.3; Willem J. van Asselt, “Christ’s Atonement,” 62.
- ³¹ Sam Storms, “Socinianism,” chap. A.
- ³² John Suggit, “Freedom to Be,” 32.
- ³³ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 167; John Suggit, “Freedom to Be,” 37.
- ³⁴ David F. Wells, “The Debate over the Atonement in 19th-Century America, Part 3,” 576:369.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 373f.; Sam Storms, “Grotius and the Governmental Theory of the Atonement,” chap. A.
- ³⁶ *Id.*, “Socinianism,” chap. A.
- ³⁷ *Id.*, “Augustine-Pelagius,” part 1, s.v. “Pelagius”, chap. C.3.
- ³⁸ John Suggit, “Freedom to Be,” 37; Abelard also spoke of “redemption by the blood of Christ”, see Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 167; cf. Willem J. van Asselt, “Christ’s Atonement,” 62.
- ³⁹ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 167f.; David F. Wells, “The Debate over the Atonement in 19th-Century America, Part 3,” 576:366f.; Sam Storms, “Grotius and the Governmental Theory of the Atonement,” chap. D.
- ⁴⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Vicarious Atonement through Christ*, 26; Sam Storms, “Socinianism,” chap. B; Willem J. van Asselt, “Christ’s Atonement,” 62.

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- ⁴¹ John Suggit, “Freedom to Be,” 35; David F. Wells, “The Debate over the Atonement in 19th-Century America, Part 3,” 576:375.
- ⁴² Sam Storms, “Grotius and the Governmental Theory of the Atonement,” addendum; Grotius was an Arminian, see Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 232.
- ⁴³ Sam Storms, “Augustine-Pelagius,” part 1, s.v. “Pelagius”, chap. C.
- ⁴⁴ John Suggit, “Freedom to Be,” 33; Willem J. van Asselt, “Christ’s Atonement,” 62.
- ⁴⁵ David F. Wells, “The Debate over the Atonement in 19th-Century America, Part 3,” 576:369f., 373.
- ⁴⁶ Sam Storms, “Socinianism,” chap. A.
- ⁴⁷ Philip Schaff, *St. Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 301f; available from <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf105.html>>; Internet (accessed 11 August 2008); see also Luther’s treatise on the bondage of the will recorded in Eric Lund, ed., *Documents from the History of Lutheranism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 48-50.
- ⁴⁸ David F. Wells, “The Debate over the Atonement in 19th-Century America, Part 3,” 576:376.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 374.
- ⁵⁰ Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 168; Sam Storms, “Grotius and the Governmental Theory of the Atonement,” chap. A.