

## Atonement Theories

from Brian D. McLaren,  
*The Story We Find Ourselves In*, 2003.

"... I have to begin by saying that all of these atonement theories assume that our alienation from God is a tragic predicament we can't solve ourselves. The only way we can be rescued is by God's grace. So in each theory, God graciously rescues us, forgives us; we don't earn forgiveness at all, but we receive it as a gift, by grace, through faith. OK? So each theory is an attempt to explain the role that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection play in the drama of our reconciliation with God." [page 102]

### 1. Substitution theory

Humans have misused their freedom and have done wrong (sin) and deserve punishment. God's justice cannot just "let it slide" because that would only deepen our human predicament of being trapped ever more deeply in the destructiveness of sin. Jesus on the cross suffers all the punishment that all humanity deserves; he substitutes. [page 101]

### 2. "Ransom" theory

Humans through their sin have placed themselves under the authority of Satan. Jesus offers himself to Satan as a ransom for humankind. Satan agrees that, in return for Jesus, he will let humanity go free. Satan then has Jesus tortured and killed. God outwits Satan by raising Jesus from the dead. (Maybe the most ancient theory.) [page 103]

### 3. "Christus Victor" theory

"In the Christus Victor theory, our enemy is death. By entering into and overcoming death, Jesus opens the door for us to enter eternal life." (Perhaps the most dominant theory throughout church history.) [page 104]

### 4. "Perfect Penitent" theory

This theory holds that God wants to forgive. But it believes that, for

forgiveness to be legitimate and real, an expression of sincere repentance is required. But none of us is "very good at repenting ... deep down, a part of us, at least, still loves to sin. Our best repentance is always ambivalent, partial, holding back. So this theory sees Jesus' acceptance of death ... as his enacting, on behalf of the whole human race, perfect repentance for us. He becomes a representative of all humanity, and willingly submits himself to being condemned and punished on our account, in spite of his true innocence, as a way of acting out real repentance for the human race." (The view preferred by C.S.Lewis.) [page 104]

### 5. Moral Influence theory

"In this theory, the cross demonstrates Jesus' self-giving, his complete abandonment to God's will, his complete self-devotion for the sake of the world. Jesus' death completes the whole message of his life: he makes visible the self-giving love of God. When that sacrificial love touches us, we are changed internally – 'constrained' is the word Paul uses for it – so that we want to stop being selfish, and we want to join God in self-giving, ... and leading us to give ourselves to our neighbors and the world too." [page 105]

### 6. Powerful Weakness theory

It works like this: by becoming vulnerable on the cross, by accepting suffering FROM everyone, Jews and Romans alike, rather than visiting suffering ON anyone, Jesus is showing God's loving heart, which wants forgiveness, not revenge, for everyone. Jesus shows us that the wisdom of God's kingdom is sacrifice, not violence. It's about accepting suffering and transforming it into reconciliation, not avenging suffering through retaliation. So through this window, the cross shows God's rejection of the human violence and dominance and oppression that have spun the world in a cycle of crisis from the story of Cain and Abel through the headlines in this morning's *Washington Post*. ... The cross calls humanity to stop trying to make God's kingdom happen through coercion and force, which are always self-defeating in the end, and instead, to welcome it through self-sacrifice and vulnerability." [page 105]

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## Neo's "theory"

"Oh, I guess I might have one other theory of the atonement, but this one comes more from my own life. It might be more biography than theology. Maybe it connects somehow with the ones we've already been talking about." We didn't say anything. For several seconds, Neo continued looking down into the water, breathing slowly, brow furrowed, lips pursed. Then he continued, first looking at each of us, then staring down at the fraying bandage on his forearm the whole time he talked. There were just two sounds: his deep, slow voice and the water lapping against the boat. "When I was married, my wife – my ex-wife – had an affair, more than one actually. It was . . . beyond words . . . devastating. I was a pastor, and a good husband, I think. I'll never forget . . ."

... "I've never told this to anyone, and I think I need to." Now he was shaking his head, his eyes looking down; they may have been closed. "Unless you've experienced it, you never know how *physical* betrayal feels. It's something you physically feel. You trust someone, you think you know them, and then you find out, you find out you've been fooled, used, taken for granted, taken advantage of. You feel cheap, and violated, and your whole body --"

Now Kerry interrupted. She put one hand on his shoulder and leaned forward as if trying to make eye contact with him, but he kept staring at his bandages. "Yes," she said, "I know, Neo. Your whole world goes empty, and your stomach burns, and your legs feel numb, and your neck feels cold, and your lungs feel like you're breathing some poisonous gas, and your brain is like one big fire alarm buzzing so loud you can hardly stand it. It's exactly as you said: betrayal is something you feel in your whole body. Believe me, Neo, I will never forget it either."

... Neo took a deep breath and resumed his story. "Anyway, we got counseling, and we talked, and she said she was sorry. She said all the right things. And I loved her, and I had made solemn vows to her. I really believed in marriage vows, and I still do. So I forgave her. And that was one of . . . no, that was *the* hardest thing I ever did. I don't know how to make that into a theory, but ever since that day, when I think of the cross, I think it's all about God's agony being made visible – you know, the pain of forgiving, the pain of absorbing the betrayal and forgoing any revenge, of risking that your heart will be hurt again, for the sake of love, at the very worst

moment, when the beloved has been least worthy of forgiveness, but stands most in need of it. It's not just something legal or mental. It's not just words; it has to be embodied, and nails and thorns and sweat and tears and blood strike me as the only true language of betrayal and forgiveness."

I can't remember what happened next, because I think we all withdrew into our own thoughts for some time. Then Neo's tone of voice changed, and he said, "Anyway, we worked hard at saving our marriage, but in the end, she left, and . . . that was it."

Kerry said, "I was never given that chance, that chance to forgive. I don't know if I could have done it had I been given the chance." She reached over and let her hand dangle in the water for a few seconds, and then she said, "I wonder why forgiving hurts so much." Nobody answered. [pages 106-107]

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