

### Brief overview of main atonement theories:

**Origen:** Christ's death was a ransom paid to the devil, who had acquired the rights to mankind through the Fall. (Echoed by Hilary, Augustine, Gregory, and Leo – with some modifications.)

**Athanasius:** Christ's human nature brings about a change in us, our human nature, so that we are enabled and made suitable for sharing the divine nature. (Note the Eastern dogma of *Theosis*, as central to them as justification is to us. In varying degrees the medieval mystics, even in the West, used similar language.)

**Anselm:** Christ's death was the payment made to God for the debt of sin. Divine justice required this, and the value of Christ was infinite (as God-man) and therefore fully sufficient. God is reconciled. (Language used for this stemmed in part from Tertullian.)

**Abelard:** Christ's life and death are mainly of exemplary value, to evoke in sinners a parallel, active love (for God and for others.) Our obedience to the teachings of Christ has a part in reconciliation with God. (Bernard opposed this theory.)

**Thomas:** Christ's death was a payment to God (as Anselm had maintained), except that this wasn't really "necessary." It was simply something that God willed. (Therefore there was a kind of work of supererogation with intrinsic value of itself.) The renewal within us by the infusion of Christ's holiness is part of the equation.

**Scotus:** Christ's death had no intrinsic value, but was of value simply because God accepted it.

**Grotius:** Christ's life and death do not accomplish pardon or satisfaction, but teach us of the importance of taking divine law (and human sin) seriously. God is ultimately pleased when we appreciate Christ and strive to imitate his hatred of sin and high view of God's law. (Similar to Abelard's "moral influence" theory, but the emphasis is less on the generation of positive love and more on hatred of sin.)

**Modernists in general:** Christ's life and death are more valuable in their exemplary roles than in any imagined role of accomplishing legal satisfaction. Restoration of our relationship to God, if needed, is done by moral rejection of sin and an emotional embracing of right.

**Paleo-orthodox evangelicals:** Because of its connection to the early Church Fathers, the classic statements from the early centuries are to be preferred and are adequate.

**Liberation theologians:** The death of Jesus is an exposure of the cruelty and evil present in the worldly powers that rejected and killed him, and the resurrection is a triumph over these powers. The subversive nature of Christian resistance against evil is also vindicated.

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**Luther:** Christ's death was substitutionary, accomplished true satisfaction in the eyes of God, and removed the penalty for disobedience. Sin, death, the devil, and the law are all dealt with on our behalf. The value is forensic and infinite. (He allows previous theories to serve as largely adequate explanations of aspects of the atonement and really doesn't weigh in on particular theories as such.)

The Bible and Christians have always employed a variety of metaphors to express what they believe Jesus Christ has accomplished in reconciling the world. The church has never settled on one way of expressing the truths about Christ's work of atonement. One reason: Bible truth about Christ's work is so rich that multiple images are needed to articulate various aspects of it. Some metaphors (sacrifice, victory, doing justice, ransoming, setting free, revealing love) are more valuable and durable than others. In the end, most agree that some synthesis of metaphors is needed as we strive to understand the fullness of Christ's work. In articulating Christ's atoning work, there are basic questions that need to be kept in mind:

1. *Does the imagery used do justice to the biblical doctrine of mankind's plight?* (In every conception of Christ's atonement there is a correlation to man's predicament due to sin.)
2. *Does the imagery used clearly or adequately express the lavish grace of God?* (In many conceptions, God's love is treated as partial, conditional, or less than satisfying.)
3. *Does the imagery maintain the distinction between law and gospel, between justification and sanctification?* (In many conceptions these are confused or one is unnecessarily slighted at the expense of the other.)