

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 John 4:7-11

"Atonement"

Today in our little tour of Christian theology, we take up where *John 3:16* left us: God has acted in Jesus' death to reconcile us to himself. *1 John 4:10* repeats the theme, but also invites the question: *how* exactly? What is *atonement*? Or put more simply, *what did Jesus do on the cross and in his resurrection?* Given that the cross is the major symbol of Christianity and adorns all our churches, what does the cross "*mean*"? What does it mean to say that "*Christ died for us*"?

Let's stipulate at the start that there is a great mystery here: an action within the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit that we cannot fully penetrate. Even the Bible does not give us full understanding, and we will never get it in this life. But if the theme is *reconciliation with God*, the word used to describe how that happens is *atonement*. What is that? It is in fact an English word freshly coined by the translator William Tyndale in the early 1500s to express Hebrew and Greek words that had no English equivalent. His word *atonement* was in fact "*at-one-ment*," and in Tyndale's earliest drafts of his English Bible he spells it that way!

But that seems on the surface just to rephrase what *reconciliation* means. What is *atonement*?

We have some idea from everyday usage that *atonement* is the principle that "*a price must be paid to make up for a wrong that has been done.*" If you've read Ian McEwan's fine

novel *Atonement* or seen the movie, you know that young Briony makes a naive and mistaken accusation of sexual assault against her older sister's boy-friend, and then has to atone for it by nursing brutally injured British soldiers after the army's evacuation at Dunkirk. Perhaps McEwan also intends at another level that Britain atones in WWII for the follies and feckless leadership of the 1920s and 30s? Abraham Lincoln in his Second Inaugural pondered whether the horrors of the Civil War were atoning for "*all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil... and every drop of blood drawn with the lash.*" *A price must be paid.*

1) Christ's Victory

So what is *atonement*, Christianly speaking? There are three main views that have been held over the years. Each is built from New Testament ideas, each is incomplete, but each tells us something important. The earliest view builds on words like *ransom* and *redemption*. "*The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many*" (Mk 10:35). "*You were redeemed by the precious blood of Christ*" (1 Pet 1:18-19). "*You are not your own, you were bought at a price*" (1 Cor 6:20).

In the early Christian centuries, this was taken to mean that Jesus had paid with his own life to free sinners from their captivity to Satan and the powers of evil. It was tied

closely to the idea that in the process, Christ also won a great battle over Satan and the dark forces. In its more mythical form, Christ was a "baited hook" that Satan swallowed – his dying humanity fooled Satan because "the hook" beneath was the indestructible life of God – and the resurrection shows that Jesus has conquered death and hell. In medieval times, the idea that Jesus "descended to hell to set the prisoners free" was very popular, and many plays and songs celebrated Jesus' victory. So on this view of atonement, believers are reconciled to God because they are *freed from their bondage to sin* to serve and love God.

This picture of atonement has interestingly revived in the 20th century, when after centuries of rationalism which discarded "mythological" talk about Satan and hell and bondage, it became acceptable again to talk about "*the powers of evil*." A century that, despite its "civilization," produced more death and horror than ever before, made the idea that "principalities and powers" are behind evil become plausible again. That *Jesus was the Victor* and had won the decisive *battle against evil* was something any Christian would want to believe.

2) *Christ Our Substitute*

But back in the 11th century, it had become clear to thinkers like Anselm that there was something wrong with "Jesus paid the Devil to ransom sinners" (which of course the New Testament never says). If anyone was owed anything, said Anselm, it was God who was owed reparation for human sin. *God needed to be repaid*, not Satan! But how could humans do that? Penance and good works could never achieve repayment; you could not "balance the books" by good deeds to atone for your sins.

So the idea of *satisfaction of our debt* by the *willing sacrifice of the sinless God-man Jesus*

became prominent. Dozens of New Testament texts speak of atonement this way: "*Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world*" (Jn 1:29); "*Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed*" (1 Cor 5:7); "*He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself*" (Heb 7:27).

Behind all this language, said Anselm, lies the fact that *sin is breaking God's Law*, and so a legal remedy has to be found. Forgiveness and reconciliation is only possible because Jesus stood in our place and took the punishment due to our sins; Jesus is our *Substitute*: "Christ died for us." So when Paul says God "*made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God*" (2 Cor 5:21), we understand that our sin was laid on him so that his righteousness could be laid on us. In popular thinking, this explains Jesus' "cry of dereliction" when on the cross he asks "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" – if that is taken to mean that "at the moment Christ 'became sin for us' the Father turned away from him."

This view was first developed fully by Anselm in the 11th century; it was refined by Thomas Aquinas, and adopted by Reformers like Luther and Calvin. It is still the reigning view among "theologically conservative" Protestants. It has the advantage of taking in a great many New Testament texts, including almost the whole book of *Hebrews*, and agreeing with Paul's emphasis on *justification* – which is also a *legal* term. One aspect of it that is less mentioned today is that Jesus' death also "*propitiated God*" – that is, "turned away God's wrath at sin," or better to say that, in Christ, "*God propitiated himself*." So substitution tells believers they are reconciled to God by Jesus' death because *their guilt is removed, they are forgiven their sins, and they are "clothed in the righteousness of Christ"* instead of the "filthy rags of their own self-righteousness."

3) Christ Our Example

There is a third view of atonement, mentioned occasionally in the New Testament but very popular at certain times in church history: that *Jesus on the cross was our great example of God's love* and how to deal with evil. On this view, if we would only follow his example of loving self-sacrifice, we would be able to break the powers of evil by absorbing their venom, "turning the other cheek," and shaming them by our love and non-violent resistance.

New Testament texts supporting this view would include: "*Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps*" (1 Pet 2:21); "*Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, that you will not grow weary*" (Heb 12:3); "*When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all men to myself*" (Jn 12:32).

The origins of this "moral influence" or "example" view go back to Anselm's pupil Peter Abelard, but this approach became very popular in the 18th and 19th century amid the widespread rejection of "mythical" and supernatural views, and the desire to make the story of Jesus an approachable human story. So *Jesus is our example and we should follow in his steps* became the theme of "liberal Christianity" in the 19th and 20th century, and persists today in those circles. It says we are reconciled to God because *what Jesus did moves us to love* as he has loved us, and to become the kind of people God wants us to be – like his Son!

4) Three Strands?

We are reconciled to God - Jesus has atoned for us - by paying a price and winning a battle so we are *free*; by standing in our place and taking our punishment, so we are *forgiven*; by teaching and demonstrating God's love to such a degree that we are

changed by *love*. Three views all try to do justice to certain New Testament texts. Does it matter what we believe? Should we choose one, or believe them all?

Let's be clear: when we reach the gates of heaven, Saints Peter and Paul will not greet us with a clipboard with ten questions we must answer to get in: "What was the date and the method of Creation?" "When and how widespread was the Flood?" "How exactly did Jesus atone for you on the cross?" *Salvation does not come from a correct view of the atonement, but by the act of Jesus Christ*, however little we understand it. Trust yourself to Jesus that he has done what is necessary, and then spend the rest of your life trying to understand all that means!

But in sorting through these ideas, I have found it helpful to reflect on what the Old Testament says about atonement. You will recall that in the life of Israel, sin has to be paid for by the sacrifice of animals and the repentance of the people. The whole sacrificial system pictures "an innocent victim who pays." The lambs, goats and bulls were "guilt offerings, sin offerings," "thanks offerings," raised up specially or purchased by sinners who wanted to be restored to right relationship to God – reconciled. The blood of the animals was taken by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement into the Most Holy Place and sprinkled over the Ark of the Covenant to "make atonement for himself, the people, and the sanctuary."

The cover of the Ark, with golden cherubim at each end, was called "*the Atonement Cover*," because at that place the people's offering met the presence of God and was accepted. The Hebrew word for atonement was *kippur* – so even today, Jews observe *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement - and the basic meaning of *kippur* was "to cover over." Sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice on the

cover of the Ark "*covered the people's sins.*" The idea is that God no longer sees, and no longer counts, sins that have been atoned for - covered. It's similar to the idea that when God forgives, he "puts our sins behind his back," or "separates them from us as far as the east is from the west."

So the Old Testament sacrificial system points to substitution and repentance, and *Isaiah 53* makes it very clear: "*he carried our infirmities... he was pierced for our transgressions... the punishment that brought us peace was upon him... by his wounds we are healed.*" That's substitution. That's Old Testament atonement, and that's what Jesus did on the cross. "*Christ our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed,*" and "when the destroyer sees the blood of the lamb on our doorposts, he spares our lives and passes over us."

But is it possible to take something good from all the views? Some think so: the Calvinists' view of *Christ as Prophet, Priest and King*, points the way. As sinners, they said, we suffer the "*3-fold misery*" of *ignorance, guilt and bondage*. We sin in *ignorance*: "*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing,*" as Jesus said from the cross! We live with *guilt* about what we have done, what we have not done, what we have thought, what we are inwardly disposed to. We are *trapped* in our habits and sins - like an addiction - and cannot find our way out. *Christ the Prophet* shows and tells us of God's love, and leads us out of ignorance; *Christ the King* wins our battles and releases us; *Christ the Priest* offers himself as a sacrifice to remove our guilt.

Do you feel that way? Are you free of guilt, moved by love, delivered from the power of sin? Do you know that the Father does not *see* your sin if it is covered by the blood of Jesus? Can you now *live free*, with your head up, *in gratitude and love* to the one who saved you? Has the light flooded in so you are no

longer ignorant about yourself, or the world, or God? Does his love flow into your heart so that now you love him and other people? Do you know you face "no condemnation" because of the atoning death of Jesus?

Let us pray...