The Atonement

Edited and condensed from A. P. Adams' "The Atonement." Ernie and Mary Kroeger

Lovers of truth are not satisfied with the teachings of religious zealots. They recognize that the teaching about Christ's vicarious atonement is a misrepresentation of God and a misrepresentation of Christ – the perfect revelation and representation of God. It distorts the truth, and it is also against the principle of justice and fair play.

We cannot detect error if we do not know truth. Truth is the light that reveals error. If we do not know who our God is in the light of Christ, we will accept error as our truth. To discover the true nature of Christ's atonement we first need to know our God. Truth leads to more truth, and error leads to more error. **In our investigation we must first know who our God is, and understand His plan for the ages, and His ability to perform His will!**

In 1 John 4:8 we read that God is love. Love is not an emotion; it is defined for us in 1 Cor. 13:4-7. Since God is love, this defines who He is in the very essence of His being! **Because He is love, love has to be the motivating force of everything He does.** It was the motivating force of His wonderful plan for making man in His image. He was also the prime mover! Any doctrine that either contradicts or obscures this fact is embedded in error.

So let's examine this doctrine of Christ dying as our substitute in the light of this truth. We have been told that the punishment for man's sin

is an eternal death of torment in hell. Is this statement correct? God told Adam that if he ate the fruit of the forbidden tree he would die. If this death were an eternal torment in hell, God would have said that. But God did NOT say that! He said that Adam would die. In God's foreknowledge and love, how could He bring into being a humanity of which the greater part would suffer in agony for all eternity?! That idea is against all logic and against the very essence of God.

Furthermore, this doctrine of substitution declares that God wishes to save man, but He cannot do so until His justice is satisfied. Someone must suffer the penalty before He can forgive the sinner and restore him to divine favor. Since that penalty is endless torment, the sinner is unable to be forgiven. Our curiosity is aroused, and we wonder about God's standard of righteousness and justice. Since God did not tell Adam and Eve that the penalty for disobedience would be endless torment, is it right for God to add an extra penalty to death without prior notification? Where is the righteousness and justice of God in sneaking in such a horrible punishment as eternal torture for a single transgression?

To think of God as being so hard and unapproachable that He needed a human sacrifice to appease His wrath, not only hides, but opposes the very essence of His being - which is love. Man makes it appear as though God had outraged justice, and Jesus had infinite love. This is error. What do the scriptures teach us? "*For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God*." (Rom. 8:20-21) Since God subjected all to futility, it is only just for Him to get

it out of its corruption. The atonement was not only the work of Christ, but "*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself*." (2 Cor. 5:19) **God's justice does not find fulfillment in punishing man, but in His abundant provision for man's salvation.** Our God *"is "a righteous God and a Savior*." (Is. 45:21) This distinguishes Him from every other so-called god.

Let's look at another error in man's doctrine of the atonement. According to the law, every violation deserves its punishment. To uphold the law, the Son of God offers to suffer the penalty instead of man. The Father accepts this substitution, and pours out His wrath upon His innocent Son, and God is reconciled and pardon is granted through Jesus Christ. Is this teaching scriptural? Does the absence of punishment change the sinner and bring him into the image of Christ? What an absurd idea! Our sense of justice also declares that having an innocent person suffer for a guilty one is outrageous. How would you feel if your beloved son would suffer the punishment for a murderer, so the murderer could be set free to continue sinning? We'd be enraged at the injustice, wouldn't we?!

No wonder that this is not the teaching we find in the scriptures! Nowhere do they teach that Christ suffered as a substitute for guilty man, or that His death was to satisfy the justice of God. **Christ both died and rose again that He might take humanity out of the death it was in and bring it into life!**

On the cross Christ united Himself with sinful humanity and took it with Him in His death and resurrection. His union with sinful humanity was actually His death. He did this in order that He might be one with

humanity so He could take humanity out of its death and raise it into life together with Him in His resurrection. This helps us to understand that Christ is a corporate man. In Adam all die and in Christ all are made alive. Christ is the second man, and in Him the old Adam ends. "*He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything*." (Col. 1:18) **He is the beginning of a new humanity that has been raised out of death into the life of Christ!**

What kind of justice is involved when the substitute really does not suffer the complete penalty? When the whole arrangement will fail to accomplish the intended purpose – the salvation of the complete human race? One deception needs more deceptions to support it and make it believable. Although they say the Father accepted this substitution, Jesus did not suffer the complete penalty, for He did not suffer endless death, because they say that His sufferings as a divine person made up in quality what they lacked in quantity. Man says that God accepted the sufferings as being equivalent to the penalty of the broken law. So there is a substitution of victims and of penalty! The fact that Christ's divine nature could not die, adds another complication. So we are told that He simply died as a human being. His divinity could not die, yet His divinity is supposed to make His death a full satisfactory penalty for the broken law.

This substitution theory also belittles God's ability, and claims that the devil can thwart God's ability to save to the uttermost. It claims that in spite of Christ's sacrifice, God's plan of salvation will only be accepted by a minority; the greater percentage of the human race will still suffer eternal torment. This negates God's sovereignty, for it claims that God

is unable to achieve His plan to save the whole world. (In a textbook we were given in China, it said that the devil was victorious because he would forever shake his fist at God and claim the victory – editors.) The substitution theory leads to this conclusion. Deception upon deception!

The scriptures invariably say that Christ died to reconcile man to God, not God to man! The difference between these two statements is as wide as the difference between the lie and the truth, and it puts God and His ways in a wrong light. It puts Jesus and God in opposition to each other. This theory magnifies Jesus as the One who loves mankind, and God is portrayed as so unrelenting that He could not forgive humanity without an innocent victim upon whom He could pour His wrath, and so unjust that He could accept an innocent person in place of the guilty.

Christ is our Savior – but under God! God is the supreme Savior! In 1 Tim. 2:3 we read, "*This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior*." He is not an angry God who had to be pacified by the sacrifice of a loving Son. He does not need to be pacified or appeased with the blood of a victim, like a pagan god.

The scriptures declare, "*For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.*" (Rom. 5:10) We were reconciled to God! "*And through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet*

He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach." (Col. 1:20-22) You can check other passages on reconciliation.

"*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself*." (2 Cor. 5:19) Notice that God was reconciling the world to Himself, and that He is the prime mover in the atonement! Although Christ died for us, and He is our propitiation and our advocate with the Father, yet Christ did not initiate the atonement. "*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.*" (John 3:16) God is the principal and Jesus Christ is His obedient Son. They are in perfect agreement! God is our Savior and Redeemer.

"*God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead*." (Acts 17:30b-31) God's judgments are based on truth, for truth reveals the lie. Christ came to do the will of the Father, so the Father is the prime mover in the whole plan of reconciliation! God does not work through substitutes! The Father Himself loves us! (John 16:27)

The need of atonement implies that two parties are in disagreement with each other. They need to be brought into harmony and union. This is the meaning and intent of the atonement. In the case of man and God, this estrangement is all on man's side. Therefore it is man who must be changed! **To say that God had to be reconciled to man is blasphemous, for it would mean that God had to change – and He is a God who never changes!**

"*By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him*." (1 John 4:9) Since the estrangement is all on man's part, we need a mediator to show us our ignorance! We need Christ to reveal the Father's love to us! Christ is the express image of the invisible God! He is the revelation of the Father to us! "*Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him."* (Matthew 11:27) We love Him because He first loved us! But we first have to learn that He loves us. The world does not know Him, and it cannot know Him until it receives a revelation of Him through Christ.

" …*and if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous*." (1 John 2:1) The term, "an Advocate with the Father," seems strange to us. Since God is our Father, why do we need an advocate with Him? Does a child need the services of an advocate to plead his own cause to his father? If the child was estranged from him, he might suppose that he needed one. The Christian world supposes that it needs one, because it does not know the Father's love. It does not know that the Father loves them. But the Father does not need an advocate because He was never unreconciled! However the children need one in order to make the Father's love known to them.

Knowing that God is love, it follows that God's plan for us is for our good! Therefore God's plan for sin and evil to come into this world, causing our estrangement from God, and His abundant provision for our salvation and union with Him came out of a heart of love. We are God's workmanship, created for good works! **Since He planned that**

sin should come into this world, He also made abundant provision for all to be brought into unity with Him. Passing through the various stages of restoration brings us into a greater knowledge of who God is – of the riches of His grace and the depths of His love!

These truths deliver us from the false dogma of eternal torment. Endless torment is not the punishment for the broken law, and therefore man did not need a substitute to pretend to suffer this death for him. Moreover, since evil is one of our educators, we know that it is always ultimately for our good. God disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. (Hebrews 12:10) Just as Jesus was made perfect through suffering, so we are perfected through sufferings. Then why should we be saved from these experiences? These are God's blessings in disguise.

Since substitution is out of place in God's dealings with us, how do we explain verses like, He "*tasted death for every man…the just for the unjust…He bore oiur sins,*" etc.? This is clarified when we notice that the preposition 'for' is used, and not 'instead'. Jesus Christ died **for** us, but He did **not** die instead of us. In His death He was united with sinful humanity. He was not man's substitute. He was the scapegoat that took away the sin of the world! Christ's death was a death to sin. (Rom. 6:10) We are to be made conformable to His death, and become like Him by receiving His life! (1 John 3:2)

There is no substitution in all this, but perfect union and identity of experience! We are one with Him in His suffering and death to sin, and one with Him in His resurrection life and exaltation! **Christ took**

us with Him in His death and resurrection so we could become one with Him in His life. If He was only our substitute, He would also be our substitute in His resurrection. God's plan is so much better!

The truth is that Christ died to save us, not from the penalty of our sin, but from sin itself; not from death, but out of death – out of being dead in our transgressions and sins! There would be no kindness involved in saving us from the penalty. God could remit that penalty without the intervention of a substitute or Savior. However, that would not solve the problem, for a prisoner can be freed from his jail sentence, but he would still leave that prison as an unchanged sinner. **Humanity needs to be freed from sin. Our nature needs to be changed from sinner to saint.** We need to be freed "*from the body of this death"*! (Romans 7:24)

Verse 25 gives us the answer to how we can be freed. It is through Jesus Christ our Lord! **God makes us a new creation in Christ!** (2 Cor. 5:17) **This is the purpose of the atonement! We need to be delivered completely from the bondage of corruption, and this can only be accomplished by placing us in the new man - the Lord Jesus Christ!** God in Christ does this work!

John the Baptist said, "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*." (John 1:29) He did not say "the sins of the world", as referring to particular sins. The sin of the world refers to the body of sin, which is our sinful nature. This is symbolized in the law by the scapegoat that took away the sin of the whole nation of Israel. **Christ's work is even greater, for He took away the sin of the world – not just of one nation!**

Christ came to seek and to save the lost. They were not in danger of being lost – they were already lost! Christ died to give life to a people who were already dead in their sins. He came to bring us abundant life! This shows us how completely the atonement is of God! A dead person cannot get himself back into life. He cannot help himself in any way.

In 2 Cor. 5:18-21 Paul wrote, "*Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ* and *gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin* (a sin offering – Concordant) *on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him*."

Notice that the finished, completed work of reconciliation is the basis for entreating the sinner to be reconciled to God. The popular view is just the opposite. Repent sinner, and then you can be reconciled to God! But Paul says that reconciliation **has** taken place; therefore be reconciled! **When we submit ourselves to God, we can enjoy a relationship with Him!** This is in line with Isaiah's message from the Lord, "*I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud and your sins like a heavy mist. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you."* (44:22) The reason for their return is that they have been redeemed! This is glorious news and reason for great rejoicing! (v.23)

Those who put the cause for the effect, and the effect for the cause, make the foundation for repentance the result of that repentance. This makes the accomplishment of God's work dependent on poor weak man who is dead in his transgressions and sins, and represents the promise as no better than the law covenant. Surely there is an infinite difference between God's, " I have done it," and "I will do it IF you will do thus and so."

Isaiah pronounces a woe on people "*who call evil good, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight!"* (5:20-21)

T**he work of God in Christ enables us to become partakers of His divine nature!** "*For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust*." (2 Peter 1:4)

Let's look at another error in the popular theology of the atonement. In it God is represented as being wrathful and furious against man for having broken His law. Then Christ steps in and pacifies the Father by sacrificing Himself. This appeases God, His anger is turned away, and He begins to love mankind. In this way the atonement is made the CAUSE of God's love, and the love of God is represented as a RESULT flowing out of Christ's work of reconciliation. The language of the creeds implies this. In fact the majority of Christians view the atonement as being the CAUSE of God's love, when in reality it is the effect.

The truth is that God's love led TO the atonement; it did NOT flow FROM it. The scriptures testify to this. "*God so loved the world*" – that is why He gave His only begotten Son! **The atonement brought into our vision the Father's pre-existing, but unknown love**. "*We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren…by this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him*." (1John 3:16;4:9) By discovering that He first loved us, our eyes are opened so we can begin to live in HIM.

You may have heard the story of the mother who said to her little boy, "Now, Johnny, if you are good and obedient, Mama will love you, but if you are naughty I can't love you." To this un-motherly speech the child sorrowfully replied, "Anybody will love me when I am good, can't you love me when I am bad?" The love of God is so great that He never quits loving us! "*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*." (Rom. 5:8) This makes it very plain that God's love was the CAUSE, and not the result of the atonement. So let us not reverse this blessed truth, and put darkness for light, and light for darkness.

Some more good news is that the atonement will not be a partial, but a complete and absolute success! The work of God in Christ will not culminate in myriads perishing forever. **It will not PARTIALLY accomplish the purpose for which He died, i.e. to reconcile the WORLD to God and to "*destroy the works of the devil*." It will accomplish the work it was intended for**!

How could the joint work of the Father and the Son fall short of a perfect triumph? The truth is that it will be MUCH MORE than enough! Read Romans 5 and see how this glorious truth is emphasized. Paul's MUCH MORE takes away all doubt as to the "exceeding abundance" of God's provision for man's universal redemption forever!

What would cause us to think that our almighty God could not accomplish the purpose for which He sent Christ, namely, the reconciling of the WORLD to Himself? He sent the Son to be the Savior of the WORLD! (1 John 4:14) How can God's plans and purposes miscarry? How can a large portion of the world be lost forever in endless torment, when the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world? How could this be a testimony to God's love? God said, "*So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it."* (Is. 55:11) **Christ is the Word of God. He will accomplish the work He was sent to do!**

Let those who wish to limit the Holy One of Israel, and forget His awesome power, do so. (Ps.78:41-42) But we believe that God will do everything that He has promised to the full, for "*He is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think.*" (Eph. 3:20) Although this may sound too good to be true, it is actually impossible for anything to be too good to be true. We may truthfully say that a thing is too BAD to be true, as, for example, the doctrine of endless torment, but no human being is able to conceive or imagine a thing too good to be true – that would be equivalent to thinking of something

better than God. Comprehending the love of God surpasses knowledge! Yet this comprehension is necessary in order to be filled with the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:19)

Here is a brief summary of what we have been saying:

1. The atonement was not given for the purpose of satisfying God's justice, but to reveal His love.
2. The justice of God is not against the sinner, demanding his condemnation, but for him, ensuring his salvation.
3. God is not in contrast with Christ nor is He in opposition to Christ in the atonement, but in perfect harmony and accord.
4. The reconciliation of the world to God is not the exclusive work of Christ, but it is the work of "God in Christ".
5. Christ does not have to plead with God to make Him willing to pardon the sinner. In Christ, God has already pardoned the sinner. This is the message His children are to bring to the sinner to make the sinner willing to be reconciled to God. "*Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God*." (2 Cor. 5:20)
6. The purpose of the atonement was to make God's already existing love known to man and make man favorably disposed toward God - **not** to regain the good will of God.
7. Christ did not die as our substitute, but as us and for us.
8. Christ did not die to save us from the penalty of sin, but from sin itself.
9. Christ did not die that we might not die, but to deliver us out of a death in which we were already involved.

10. The atonement is not the cause of God's love to man, giving rise to that love, but the result that flows out of His love.
11. The sinner is not redeemed because he repents, but he is called upon to repent because he has been redeemed.
12. The final outcome of the atoning plan, is not a partial success, but a perfect, absolute and universal triumph!

In these particulars the popular theology is the opposite of the truth. Although some of these errors are not formally listed, the language leads to these errors and confirms them. These errors are not small and unimportant, only slightly differing from the truth – but they are just the opposite of the truth! They bring confusion (Babylon).

Let us rejoice that our God keeps His promises, and that His provision is greater than our need!

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