

# Achieving Atonement



**Derek Thompson**

# **Achieving Atonement**

**By**

**Derek Philip Thompson**

“Achieving Atonement”

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## Preface

“Good Friday” is the title of the above painting by Australian Aboriginal artist Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri. The phrase “Good Friday” refers to the day Christ overcame the evil of the cross. Yet evil is still with us. God worked to destroy evil from antiquity to the present and continues to the end of “the present evil age,” as Paul calls it ([Gal 1:4](#)). The Son of God entered human history to carry out his part of God’s plan for achieving atonement. But, if Jesus’ death on the cross had a positive outcome, how was this realised?

This book examines how God eradicates evil and yet saves people who are sinful. Of late, Christian theologians have been trying to further the church’s understanding of God’s plan of salvation. But controversy and argument abound. So, I will first sketch the current debate for those who are not theologians and then set out a new approach that avoids the problems. Since God is reasonable, a logical solution must exist.

The proposed model of the atonement uses the analogy between Christ saving the world from sin and a lamp shining in the darkness. The light of Christ dispels the murk of evil and illuminates his people. This image is found in Scripture. For instance, Matthew, in his gospel, described Christ's coming in terms of the dawning of light ([Matt 4:16-17](#)). John added that "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" ([John 1:5](#)). The use of this analogy suggests the name for this approach as *Lumen Christi* (light of Christ). Aboriginal artwork at the start of each chapter is presented as a reminder of the unpretentious beauty of the gospel. Christian theology needs to be like this.

The *Lumen Christi* model builds on God's commitment to being God to his people. The model applies the discipline of critical reasoning to develop its logic. In addition, recent scholarly work on Paul's theology provided encouragement for a fresh interpretation of Scripture. The Holy Spirit must be credited for contributing new insights on Scripture through my prayer journaling. Not that I am claiming divine inspiration status for my writing. Any errors are mine. But the aim is to progress the study of salvation to the glory of God and praise of our Saviour.

Derek Thompson, B.E. (Elec.), Dip. Th.

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## 1. The Atonement Problem

Atonement is not a course of action, but an end, the goal God is seeking to achieve. God's ways are often said to be a mystery beyond human comprehension. I. H. Marshall (2008, p. 63) said, "It is true that the concept of God the Son suffering and dying is paradoxical and incomprehensible." Although God's inner nature is a mystery, his actions in creation are open to investigation. Human nature pursues understanding. Some Christians object to the questioning of their preferred atonement theory, viewing such questioning as a challenge to the gospel itself. Despite the fact that Christianity's central message is of salvation and reconciliation with God, its theologians disagree over the gospel's basic logic. Christians must understand the atonement if they are to proclaim the faith to a needy world in a reasonable and coherent manner. After all, the search for truth leads to Jesus, who claimed to be the truth.

### What's in a Word?

Atonement is an English word dating from the sixteenth century. At first, it meant at-one-ment, combining the verb at-one (pronounced "at-wun") with "ment" to form a noun meaning reconciliation. John Wycliffe introduced the word into

the English translation of the Bible in 1564 and the King James Authorised version of 1611 continued its use.

Over time, the word atonement took on the theological meaning of reconciliation of a sinner with God won by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Vincent Brummer (1992, p. 435) used it in this sense when he wrote of the broken relationship between sinners and God: “The fundamental religious issue which we all have to face, therefore, is how this relationship can be restored. How can we attain ultimate bliss by being reconciled with God? Basically, this is the issue with which the doctrine of atonement has to deal.”

However, more recently, atonement has again needed to have its meaning expanded. People are now more concerned with environmental issues than they were in the past. We can no longer ignore such things as climate change and declining ecologies. As a result, atonement now needs to extend beyond personal salvation to include the making good of creation. The definition becomes the work of God to heal the brokenness in creation, whether seen in human moral failures or nature’s mishaps.

### **Criteria for a good soteriology**

Alister McGrath (2007, p. 330) dislikes the “atonement theory” phrase and prefers to discuss atonement under the heading of soteriology (the study of salvation). He says “theories of atonement” is cumbersome and unhelpful. Changing the wording does not change the fact that theologians cannot agree how God is achieving atonement. So, I use the term “theory” to emphasise the provisory nature of atonement models and give freedom to explore options.

Atonement theories must satisfy the following criteria.

1. Enhance the preaching of the gospel.



2. Accord with the full range of biblical teaching.
3. Be consistent with the good, gracious, holy and merciful nature of God.
4. Encourage Christlike behaviour in Christians.
5. Be coherent, reasonable, and ethical. God does not approve of us insinuating he is unfair ([Ezek 18:29](#)).
6. Support ecumenism and retain the truths found in the churches' historical atonement teaching.

Traditional atonement theories, as we shall see, fail to meet all the above criteria. For readers unfamiliar with the traditional theories and the criticisms made of them, the next chapter provides a brief overview. Ample references will be given for readers to follow up subjects of interest. Those conversant with the current debate can skim through to Chapter 3.

The church needs to clearly articulate this basic belief. Denominational and theological dogmatism resists change, but it is for the better. Non-Christians are quick to criticise any deficiencies in Christian teaching. The church should acknowledge the shortcomings of current theories and give itself permission to review afresh its interpretation of Scripture and how God makes things right with sinners. This book sets out a model that aims to meet all the above-stated criteria so we will check it against them in Chapter 9.

## **Redemptive Violence**

One of the main problems atonement theories face is how to relate human redemption to the violence of the cross. God is not vindictive and does not use evil means for good ends. Good ends never justify evil means in God's sight even when there is no alternative. In such cases, we just confirm we live in a sinful

world. For anyone, let alone God, to use violence to attain a good outcome is unethical.

So, is there a way of relating Jesus' violent death on the cross to human salvation from sin? Did God require the violent death of Christ to save sinners from death? Is suffering required for redemption? Even if the wages of sin is death why would another death reconcile people with God? Jesus expected his followers to know the answers to these questions. He scolded his disciples for not understanding the Scriptures, saying "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" ([Luke 24:26](#)). Jesus implied there is a causal link between his suffering and his exaltation. But Jesus did not assert the link between his crucifixion and the redemption of God's people is causal. It may be incidental.

The conviction that violence can be redemptive is commonplace. J. Denny Weaver (2001, p. 156) said, "The assumption that doing justice means meting out punishment – is virtually universal among North Americans and throughout much of the world."

Daniel M. Bell Jr (2009, p. 23) said, "the message that violence redeems is pervasive." We see it in the war against terrorism, liberal gun laws, harsh prison sentences, death penalties and movies where the characters use "good violence" to overcome those who use "bad violence." Bell says even our language betrays the conviction that violence is redemptive, e.g. "war on drugs" and "battle with cancer." The problem is not that people sometimes use good violence to overcome bad violence. In a sinful world, it might be necessary to use violence for the greater good. But for God to require violence for salvation would imply God is vindictive. To be vindictive implies having an attitude towards offences that demands revenge, retaliation and retribution. If an atonement theory

attributed such an attitude to God, it would reflect badly on the theory (rather than on a good God).

Atonement theories that make Christ's violent death integral to God's plan of salvation are open to criticism on several fronts. It is not the intention of this book to examine these criticisms in detail, just to make the reader aware of the lack of agreement in Christendom regarding this central teaching. A few concerns are listed below. Note: The Scripture reference in brackets after each reason is typical of those used to support the contention that violence is sometimes acceptable, but they represent a misuse of Scripture.

- a) Victims of violence might think passive acceptance is a virtue because Christ willingly suffered to save people from sin ([Matt 26:39](#)). Examples of this are women who endure domestic violence as their "cross to bear."
- b) Christians may use "good violence" to obtain a desirable result because God's anger at sin is just ([Matt 3:7](#)).
- c) God needs to use violence to avenge and overcome sin ([John 1:29](#)).

The concept of retribution is vague. Cottingham (1979) and Walker (1999) identified many varieties of retribution theories. These include repayment of a debt, punishment as deserved, a penalty for an offence, the satisfaction of the victim, balancing the scales of fairness, and appeasing the wrath of God. Even if all these theories were knitted together, they would not justify redemptive violence by God.

Joachim Molander (2009, p. 195) argued for what he calls "atonement retributivism". This, he says, does not justify punishment, but sees punishment as part of a conceptual puzzle

where punishment operates alongside confession, penance, forgiveness and reconciliation. He wrote, “Pain and suffering can thus help the evil-doer to reach an insight into who he has become.” The problem with this argument is that the inflicting of retributive pain and suffering would also give an insight into the character of their instigator. With God, such “severe mercy” would belie his grace and love.

Christopher Bennett (2002, p. 163) contended retribution can be positive. For example, it can be restorative for people alienated from society. Punishment can lead a person to repent of their moral guilt and reintegrate into the community. Bennett did not concede that retributive punishment can also have the opposite effect. The mere possibility of violence being redemptive does not warrant its general use by anyone, including God. Besides, for God on Judgement Day, the only positive effect of retribution is the destruction of evil.

Not every instance of anger is vindictive, nor all violence unjustified. Even though God has good reason to be angry with evil-doers, for God to require a blood sacrifice to save people is a very different matter. Lisa Cahill (2007, p. 428) pointed out, “Nowhere in the New Testament does forgiveness depend on punishment or retribution.”

Thomas Talbott (1993, p. 158) said because God is infinitely great, no amount of suffering can pay for humanity’s offence against him. Talbott concluded, “Punishment is simply not the sort of thing that could pay for any offence; it is no equipoise at all for sin” (p. 160). “Punishment alone does nothing to make up for, or to cancel out, any crime” (p. 161).

### **Atonement Theories and Redemptive Violence**

Many atonement theories accept redemptive violence. Hans Boersma (2005, p. 202) of the Reformed tradition asserted,

“And is this not what traditional atonement theology – of whatever stripe – has always implied: that in the cross God uses violence for redemptive ends?” The claim, fighting evil is not colluding with evil, may sometimes be valid in human conflicts, but when applied to the atonement, it implicates God in using the cruel death of Christ to defeat evil. Many scholars criticise those theories which assume the Father approved of the crucifixion of the Son as being both immoral and unscriptural.

Many of the atonement references in Scripture have a metaphorical meaning. The metaphorical nature of religious language has been much debated by philosophers and theologians. Linguists Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 486) argued all language is metaphorical. They conjectured that metaphors are concepts in themselves. So, care should be taken not be too literal when interpreting atonement metaphors. Over time, these literary devices suffer the fate of becoming “dead metaphors” which no longer convey the original intent of the author.

Henri Blocher (2004, p. 632) observed, “The common charge levelled at the traditional view is that of unwarranted literalism.” The purpose of atonement metaphors in Scripture is to illuminate meaning. But Robert Daly (2007, p. 36) said the over-logical application of atonement metaphors leads to bad theology, which leads to bad morality. For example, if one takes Paul’s metaphors of Jesus as being a redemption price or scapegoat for sin beyond their limits, they would appear to be buying favour from a restitution seeking God (Daly, 2007,

p. 43). Daly added, he was not only referring to Christians in past ages. He cited present Christian support for wars that go beyond the just war theory, the prevalence of capital punishment, the belief that only unnecessary violence is wrong, and the wish for God to dispense judgement upon non-Christians. Daly said if Christians are to imitate God, it is important they do not see God as vindictive. Otherwise, they will be too ready to accept or inflict violence themselves (p. 37). God is good. So, atonement theories assigning unjust behaviour to God are defective.

Lisa Cahill (2007, p. 424) wrote, “Roger Haight speaks for many when he expresses doubt about atonement theories that make salvation available through the cross, ‘indirectly make Jesus’ death something good,’ and engender a spirituality that is fascinated by suffering.” Mark McIntosh (2008, p. 99) asked, “is there an interpretation of Jesus’ death that sees its significance for salvation, but does not:

- 1) Isolate his death from the rest of what Christians believe,
- 2) Reduce the import of his death to a form of satisfaction for a divine demand, or
- 3) Legitimize passive suffering or violence as inherently necessary, praiseworthy, or divinely sanctioned?”

Theologians have suggested other atonement theories, but these do not meet with all of McIntosh’s requirements nor my six criteria. This has driven some to say the redemptive violence of the cross is a mystery (Komonchak, 2005, p. 22).

Saying God's ways are a mystery as a defence for holding a flawed theory is not acceptable.

J. Denny Weaver (2001, p. 172) said theologians need to “construct theology that specifically reflects the nonviolence of its namesake, Jesus Christ.” Can we understand Jesus' violent death as not being required by God for human salvation? Or was Christ's crucifixion incidental, although essential, to salvation? In other words, God the Father did not require a violent sacrifice, but for God to save humanity, Christ had to endure the crucifixion. This idea will undergird the model expounded in Chapters 4 and 5.

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