

# Achieving Atonement

Second Edition



**Derek Thompson**

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By

**Derek Philip Thompson**

“Achieving Atonement” Second Edition

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## Preface to the Second Edition

A benefit of self-publishing a book is the ease of issuing a second edition and, in this case, the importance of the subject demands one's best. The gospel is the heart of Christianity and atonement is the heart of the gospel. Even though atonement theories are not essential to salvation, the saved theologian will want to enquire into how God is achieving atonement.

This edition has benefited from feedback I received on the first edition and I thank those who commented. I am pleased to say that the basic reasoning remains intact and I only needed to provide fuller explanations.

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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 died on the cross. When Christians speak of “the cross” they are referring to more than Christ’s violent death, they have in mind his triumphant resurrection and victory over evil. Of course, death and evil are still with us. But God has been fighting evil from time immemorial and will continue to the end of “the present evil age,” as Paul called it in [Gal 1:4](#). The Son of God entered human history in order to undertake the vital element of God’s plan of atonement. The question we will pursue here is, how is God achieving atonement and what role did Christ’s crucifixion play?

We will examine how God eradicates evil and yet saves people who are sinful. In recent decades, Christian theologians

have been working to further the church's understanding of God's plan of salvation. But controversy and argument abound. So, I will sketch the current debate for those who have not been following it before and propose a solution that avoids the problems. God is reasonable, so a logical solution should exist.

The model of atonement advanced employs the biblical analogy of light shining in the darkness with Christ dispelling the murk of evil. Christ's light illuminates his people, eliminating the power, shame and guilt of sin. Matthew, in his gospel, described Christ's coming in terms of the dawning of light ([Matt 4:16-17](#)). John wrote, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" ([John 1:5](#)). This is analogous to overcoming evil with good ([Rom 12:21](#)) and suggests the name for this model as *Lumen Christi* (light of Christ). The aboriginal artwork at the start of each chapter is a reminder of the unpretentious beauty of the gospel. Christian theology should seek the elegant solution.

*Lumen Christi* builds on God's commitment to be 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 provides encouragement for a fresh interpretation of Scripture. I credit the Holy Spirit 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 atonement 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 so much a course of action, as 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) thought, "It is true that the concept of God the Son suffering and dying is paradoxical and incomprehensible." Although God's nature extends beyond our understanding, his actions in creation are open to investigation. If we insist God's work for atonement is a mystery, the search for truth is stymied.

Many Christians become defensive if anyone questions their understanding of the atonement, viewing such questioning as a challenge to the gospel itself. My aim is not to undermine any Christian's faith, but to strengthen faith. Christianity's central message is about salvation from death and reconciliation with God, but its own theologians disagree over its inner logic. Christians must explain how God is achieving atonement in order to proclaim the faith in a reasonable and coherent manner. Does not the search for truth lead to Jesus? He claimed to be the truth ([John 14:6](#)).

## What's in a Word?

Atonement is an English word dating from the early sixteenth century. At first, it meant at-one-ment, combining the verb at-one (pronounced “at-wun”) with “ment” to form a noun meaning unity by reconciliation. William Tyndale introduced the word into his English translation of the Bible of 1526. The use of the word was continued in the King James Authorised version of 1611.

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.”

There are some differences in emphasis between the different segments of Christianity. The protestant churches emphasise salvation from condemnation, while Catholicism gives priority to redemption from slavery to sin. In the Byzantine (or Eastern Orthodox) tradition, the focus is on divine compassion rather than justice. They see humanity's fall into sin as a wound to be healed rather than guilt to be judged. In shame and honour-based cultures (such as Arabic and Asian), God out of his goodness deals with the relational problem. In the western worldview where guilt and innocence are preeminent, God in his righteousness deals with the legal problem. Both are important. Thus, for the term atonement to have ecumenical and missional value, it must straddle personal salvation because of the offence of sin, redemption from enslavement to sin, and healing the damage to humanity caused by sin.

Furthermore, the goal of atonement must include the following three things:

1. The removal of disease and suffering;
2. Resolving environmental issues that threaten humanity (such as climate change and declining ecologies);
3. Pacifying natural disasters from such things as storms and volcanic activity.

A full orb ed atonement theory embraces not only human salvation, redemption and healing but also the making good of all creation. God’s work of atonement remedies the brokenness in creation seen in human moral failures, damaged people, and natural calamities.

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

Alister McGrath (2007, p. 330) dislikes the phrase “atonement theory” and prefers to discuss atonement under the heading of soteriology (the study of salvation). He says “theories of atonement” is a cumbersome and unhelpful phrase. 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 provisional nature of atonement models and give the 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 moral attributes of God (God is love, good, gracious, holy, merciful, etc.).
4. Encourage the response of Christlike behaviour in Christians.

5. Be coherent, reasonable, and ethical. God does not like us insinuating he is unfair ([Ezek 18:29](#)).
6. Support ecumenism and include the truths found in the churches' historical atonement teaching.

Traditional atonement theories, as I will show, do not meet all the above criteria. For readers unfamiliar with the traditional theories and the criticisms scholars make of them, the next chapter provides an overview. I will give ample references for readers to follow up subjects of interest. Those conversant with the current debate can skim through to Chapter 3.

The church should proclaim its beliefs with clarity, and this especially applies to its beliefs about Christ's work on the cross. Denominational and theological dogmatism resists change, but some changes may be for the better. Non-Christians are quick to criticise any deficiencies in the church's teaching. The church should acknowledge the shortcomings of current theories and give itself permission to review afresh its interpretation of Scripture and how God gets right with sinners. This book sets out a model that aims to meet all the above-stated criteria. We will return to them to test *Lumen Christi* against them in Chapter 9.

## **Redemptive Violence**

A major problem 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 ([Rom 3:8](#)). Good ends never justify evil means in God's sight even when we can find no alternative, such as in a so-called "just war". In such cases, humanity confirms its participation in a sinful world. For anyone, let alone God, to use the violence inflicted on Jesus for a worthy result is unethical. Even the high priest Caiaphas justified the death of Jesus as being for the protection of the nation against the Romans ([John 11:50](#)).

What are we to make of the Old Testament stories where God inflicted violence upon his enemies and even upon Israel, God's own people? When humanity separated itself from God, it brought upon itself the consequences, which sinful people perceive as God's judgement. The "punishment" for sin is self-inflicted because of humanity's sin. Sinners look for someone else to blame for their troubles. Many regard God as the higher power they need to appease. The prophets, in speaking on God's behalf to rebellious people, spoke in a language their hearers understood, employing terms such as the wrath of God, judgement and punishment. Such words fail to express God's heart of love. When Christ came, he taught people to relate to God as "father".

So, how are we to bring together Jesus' violent death on the cross and human salvation from sin? Could God require the violent death of Christ to save sinners from death? Is suffering required for redemption? The wages of sin is death, but 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 link between his suffering and his exaltation. But Jesus did not assert that the link between his crucifixion and his mission to redeem God's people is causal. It may be incidental, the two things occurring together without one causing the other.

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 heroes 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 violence to overcome atrocious violence. In our sinful world, it is sometimes necessary to use violence for the greater good. But for God to require violence for salvation would imply God is vindictive. Vindictive pagan gods call for revenge, retaliation and retribution for offences. An atonement theory attributing such an attitude to God would discredit the theory (rather than portray God as malicious).

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 my intention here to examine these criticisms, just to inform the reader of the lack of agreement in Christendom regarding this central teaching. I list a few concerns 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 deserved ([Matt 3:7](#)).
- c) God needs to use violence to avenge and overcome sin ([John 1:29](#)).

The concept of retribution is ambiguous. 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 moulded 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 also gives an insight into the character of their instigator. With God, such “severe mercy” belies 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.” Indeed, the book of Hosea teaches the opposite.

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). The argument that Christ's sacrifice was of infinite value does not explain why it should be regarded as a punishment for human sin or how it can nullify sin.

## **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.

Atonement references in Scripture often employ metaphors (e.g. a sacrificial lamb). 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. If so, we should be careful in interpreting atonement metaphors to uncover the intended meaning. This is not straightforward. 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 desire of some Christians for God to dispense judgement upon non-believers. 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 that assign unjust behaviour to God are flawed.

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). But, saying God's ways are a mystery as a defence for a flawed theory is unacceptable.

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? Could Christ's crucifixion be both incidental and essential to salvation? If so, God the Father did not require a violent sacrifice, but for God to save humanity, Christ had to endure the crucifixion. This contention undergirds the *Lumen Christi* model expounded in Chapters 4 and 5.

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