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July 09, 2010

Is Atonement A Substitution And/Or An Influence?



Is the atonement accomplished by Christ a substitution *and/or* an influence? Through the centuries, Christians have proposed and debated about various atonement models which emphasize different dimensions of atonement. Based on different biblical word pictures, different models have been proposed such as: victory, ransom, satisfaction, moral influence, substitution, government, and reconciliation. Bruce Demarest has helpfully summarized these atonement models in his book: *The Cross and Salvation*.

Contemporary discussions about atonement tend to focus on debates concerning the models of penal substitution and moral influence. In these debates the impression is sometimes given that these models are mutually exclusive. However, Caroline Bynum corrects this misunderstanding in her research on “The Power in the Blood” in the book *The Redemption*. The relevant question is not: Is atonement a substitution or an influence? The question is: Is atonement a substitution and an influence?

Actually, the dimensions of substitution and influence were implicit in the atonement models developed in the early after the death of the apostles. These dimensions then became more explicit in competing models as the Church further clarified its understanding of the Bible. Finally, the most recent models of atonement seek to balance the dimensions of substitution and influence in new ways. This history will be briefly surveyed here.

Early Models

During the first 1000 years of Christianity, the Victory Model and the Ransom Model focus the influence of atonement substitution toward the deliverance and ransom of sinners from slavery to sin and Satan.

In contrast, and much later, Anselm (d. 1109) articulated the Satisfaction Model which grounds the influence of the atonement in a meritorious substitution by Christ which is focused toward the satisfaction of God. As the God-man, on behalf of humanity, Christ is able to satisfy divine honor which was offended by sin.

Soon another shift in atonement thinking was introduced by Peter Abelard (d. 1142) whose Moral Influence Model interprets Christ’s substitution as a demonstration of God’s love toward sinners. This love is understood as a moral influence that brings sinners into a right relationship with God.

Reformation Models

Later, during the Protestant Reformation, a contrasting emphasis was provided in the Substitution Model developed by reformers such as Martin Luther (d. 1546) and John Calvin (d. 1564). Without denying its moral influence, they focus

atonement toward calming God's wrath (propitiation) by Christ's substitution for sinners in bearing the punishment required by God's law (penal substitution).

Other models of atonement seek to incorporate elements of the Substitutionary and Moral Influence models. The Divine Government Model, promoted by Hugo Grotius (d. 1645), interprets Christ's substitution as a token punishment for sin focused toward upholding the law of God's government and effecting a limited moral influence.

A Modern Model

More recently, the Universal Reconciliation Model was articulated by Karl Barth (d. 1968). He blends the dimensions of substitution and influence by proposing that the incarnation of Christ involves His corporate unity with sinners so that atonement is grounded in the fact that we all died and were resurrected with Him.

Toward A Holistic Model

Each of these atonement models is informed by biblical word pictures and therefore contains elements of truth regarding relations between Christ's substitution for us and his moral influence in us. However, no single model provides a fully balanced biblical perspective and, as Raoul Dederen points out in the *Handbook of SDA Theology*, "none has succeeded in being universally accepted" by all Christians as the final word on atonement.

Therefore, in our contemporary debates about atonement let us hold together the glorious truths that atonement includes substitution and influence. Christ poured out his blood as a substitute for us so that our sins against God may be forgiven. At the same time, there is power in the blood of Christ to draw us into a life transforming relationship with God.

As Ellen White writes: "Christ made a full atonement, giving His life as a ransom for us . . . to become a substitute . . . for humanity" (Lift Him Up, 345). "The cross was . . . the means of atonement. . . . God's means of winning men to Him" (Manuscript 165, 1899). "As an atonement. . . the victory gained at His death on Calvary broke forever the accusing power of Satan over the universe" (Selected Messages, 1:341). "The cross must occupy the central place because it is the means of man's atonement and because of the influence it exerts" (Testimonies, 6:236).

This holistic model of atonement is grounded in the Bible. Christ's atonement substitution and influence are clearly presented by Paul in Romans 5:8. "God demonstrates his love toward us (that is influence), in that . . . Christ died for us [That is substitution.]." Furthermore, Jesus promised atonement substitution when he said: "I will give my flesh for the life of the world" (John 6:51). He also promised that his atonement would have great influence when he said: "If I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32).


Questions

- Can anything be added to the perfection of Christ's completed atoning sacrifice as a substitute for us? Is the powerful influence of Christ's atonement a part of his atonement or an addition to his atonement?
- Do we compromise biblical teaching if we limit our model of atonement to what Christ has done for us? Do we compromise biblical teaching if we include in our model of atonement the powerful influence of Christ's atonement?

Posted by Martin Hanna on July 09, 2010 in Historical Theology | Permalink

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Comments

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Thank you, Martin, for your accessible and succinct overview of the development of the models of atonement in the Christian church. As I understand you, the problem has not been in obtaining new insights into the truths of the atonement. Rather, problems have arisen when one claims that the new insights (whether moral influence or substitution) are the only true or worthy insights. It is hard to see why these truths cannot be understood as complementary, rather than in competition, as it is so often phrased these days.

Having said this, are there teachings regarding the atonement that you would view as strictly problematic, and not worth making part of the whole? For instance, the early models you mention about making a payment to Satan to release sinners, is this something you would

incorporate into our modern model?

Posted by: Nicholas Miller | [July 10, 2010 at 05:29 PM](#)

Nicholas, you have identified an important point that is highlighted in my blog. There are biblical elements in various models of atonement which are complementary. In addition, your question reminds me of another concern that motivated my blog. Some of the biblical elements in atonement models have been twisted away from their proper significance through a literalistic or legalistic interpretation.

For example, the concept that “atonement is like being ransomed from slavery to sin and Satan” is an authentic biblical “word picture” or metaphor. But the idea of a literalistic ransom required by Satan and payed to him by Christ is a misunderstanding based on a legalistic interpretation of the ransom metaphor.

There is great danger in legalistic interpretations of any of the biblical models of atonement. For example, some have interpreted the substitution model of atonement so legalistically that they conclude (1) since Christ is a substitute for all, then all will ultimately receive eternal life; or (2) since all will not receive eternal life, then Christ was a substitute for some and not for others

In fact, legalistic interpretations contribute to the common view that one model is correct and the others are wrong. However, an authentic reading of the biblical models will allow us to conclude rightly that atonement is multifaceted. Atonement is a victory, a ransom, a satisfaction, a moral influence, a divine government, a universal reconciliation, and a substitution.

At the same time, atonement is a miracle and mystery that is bigger than all these models. It is not completely explained by any one model or by all the models put together. The miracle and mystery of the atonement will be a subject of study throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity!

Posted by: [Martin Hanna](#) | [July 10, 2010 at 09:05 PM](#)

Dr. Hanna you ask if a substitutionary interpretation of atonement alone or a substitutionary and moral influencing interpretation of atonement compromises Biblical teaching. If both these teachings, whether exclusive or combined, are the parameters of atonement theology then perhaps we are misunderstanding Biblical teaching. What if the presupposition of your question assumes a paradigm that itself compromises Biblical teaching? A substitutionary and/or moral influence interpretation both justify the sinner/man to the Law as revealed in scripture. The substitutionary interpretation of atonement renders the sinner innocent in regards to the Law making Christ the means to our fulfillment of the Law's requirements. In other words the law is the τέλος of Christ. A moral influence interpretation relies on a behavioralistic model that keeps God separated from humanity. Humans are influenced to behave in accordance with the Law. This interpretation can even utilize the substitutionary interpretation by stating that Christ enables humans to behave in accordance with the Law. Both interpretations are based on the paradigm that the Law is τέλος of Christ. Both interpretations are founded upon the old covenant that is founded on the idea that human knowledge of good and evil and their disposition to the revelation of good and evil, the Law, determines life or death.

What if the atonement paradigm is instead the revelation of life as it was designed not pre-destined, to be? Then it would therefore need to provide life. But how? What if Christ's death on the cross raised up, for both the enemy and those who trust in Him to see, is a testimony of God's trustworthiness? Then we may see some correlations . . . Abraham's trust in God's promise that He would sacrifice the living means to that promise embodied in Isaac and the ram provided; the sacrifice ordered by God to the Israelites of their first born substituted by a lamb . . . all pointing to Christ the Lamb of God. All sacrifice is then a surrender of hope upon the means of what we perceive to be the fulfillment of God's promise that is revealed to be the true means to the fulfillment of that promise. The promise is eternal life, reconciliation with God and a restoration to the original design. This is possible on the premise that all were designed to have life from God and not of themselves. What then does Christ lifted up on the cross reveal? It reveals the perceived victory of Satan and those who attribute to themselves the means to grasp eternal life through knowledge, through Law; and a curse to those who trust God. Christ on the cross is a revelation of trust in God. But it is when we understand that Christ died trusting God and still one with Him that fulfills what the Law tried and failed to do. If we believe that Christ died apart from God then we render His testimony a lie. How can He proclaim what is written in Psalm 22 and promise what He did to the thief or pronounce the completion of the revelation? It is what follows that reveals atonement. Being crucified with Christ means we trust in God, and He is trustworthy even unto our death. Why can we believe this? Because Christ is risen and not defeated. That Christ on the cross was raised up for all to see is the testimony that no one may deny and all agree that He died. In the midst of Satanic victory and the hopelessness of those who trust in the Lord is revealed the atonement. Christ was raised from the dead, and death could not keep Him because He entrusted himself unto God. The demons believe but they do not trust. The atonement is His testimony and our hope: That God loved the world in such a manner that He provided the only begotten Son so that anyone who entrusts himself unto Him will not destroy himself but have eternal life.

If the atonement is the revelation of God's trustworthiness then we who entrust ourselves unto Him do not believe life is something to be grasped. The Law is not the τέλος of the atonement but the means by which we discover our own nothingness. For those who place their hope in Law will find only death and those who place their hope in Christ and entrust themselves unto God receive life and it is not their works that are manifested but the works of God. If the paradigm of the atonement is based on Law then its τέλος is death but if it is based on God's trustworthiness as Christ revealed then its τέλος is life eternal. Although it seems that a substitutionary and/or moral influence interpretation reveals the atonement, its appeal is limited to the flesh and what is capable only through the law. A paradigm of trust perhaps reveals the new covenant, which of course is the old . . . the original design.

Posted by: David de la Vega | [July 11, 2010 at 10:13 AM](#)

Thanks for your thoughtful comments David. I do not intend to limit the parameters of atonement to models of substitution and influence. I focus on those in my blog because they are currently being debated more than the other biblical models which I regard as included in the biblical parameters of atonement.

You mention another biblical model of "atonement as a revelation of God's trustworthiness." I agree that this model should also be regarded as proper within the parameters of our understanding of biblical atonement.

However, I would suggest that the biblical model of "atonement as revelation" is not in contradiction of the equally biblical models of "atonement as substitution or as influence." Christ is God's atonement revelation in that God reveals himself through Christ as our atonement substitute. At the same time, there is a powerful atonement influence that flows from Christ as God's atonement substitute and atonement revelation.

In addition, I agree with you that the atonement of Christ is the "end" or "goal" of the law. I agree with you that the models of atonement as substitution and as influence ought not to be understood as implying that the law is the goal rather than Christ. At the same time, it is true that the law is a witness (Rom 3:21) that through the atonement of Christ "the righteousness of the law is fulfilled" (Rom 8:4) and the law is established (Rom 3:31). Nevertheless, according to Scripture, the law is not an end in itself. Rather Christ is the end/goal of the law! (Rom 10:4).

Posted by: [Martin Hanna](#) | [July 11, 2010 at 11:15 AM](#)

I curious as to how the holistic model you propose differs from Barth's model. You say Barth also incorporates substitution and influence. Is there some other biblical aspect of atonement that Barth denies?

Posted by: [David Hamstra](#) | [July 12, 2010 at 09:59 AM](#)

David (Hamstra), my goal was not to propose a specific model for the atonement accomplished by Christ. Rather, I wanted to propose that an adequate model should be biblical and should therefore include elements of all the biblical word pictures which describe the atonement.

I did propose that biblical atonement includes dimensions of substitution and influence which are biblical. I did this in order to transcend the current controversy substitution and influence models. However, I do not regard Barth's model as adequate to communicate all the biblical data about the atonement.

Posted by: [Martin Hanna](#) | [July 12, 2010 at 09:49 PM](#)

The motivating influence of Christ's death on the cross can be seen in 2Cor 5 "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" and in that same chapter "we beg you on behalf of Christ be reconciled to God".

Also in that same chapter we have the substitutionary atonement "He made Him who knew no sin to BE sin on OUR behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him".

We also have Heb 9 "Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins".

And we have "He is the Atoning Sacrifice for OUR sins and not for our sins only but for the sins of the Whole World" 1John 2:2 NIV.

So the substitutionary atonement - paying the debt of our sins is clearly supported by the Word of God.

Colossian 2:

14 having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. (NASB)

in Christ,

Bob

Posted by: BobRyan | [July 14, 2010 at 07:45 AM](#)

Dr. Hanna,

Acknowledging ultimately that the cross is far more profound than man can comprehend... do you recommend accepting multiple biblically based atonement theories as inevitable (no megaparadigm or meta-narrative) or believe that there is an unified atonement theory (yet to be expounded) that incorporates the above attempts?

Posted by: arlyn drew | [July 19, 2010 at 06:04 AM](#)

Arlyn, I do not have a definitive answer to your question. At the same time, I tend toward the acceptance of multiple models of the atonement. This seems to be the only way to be faithful to the various biblical models. Nevertheless, there is also place for developing an atonement theory derived from various biblical models. It seems to me that such a theory should be always open to refinement. This is inevitable since the atonement is a mystery which we can never completely comprehend in our theories.

Posted by: [Martin Hanna](#) | [July 23, 2010 at 07:30 PM](#)

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