

Christ the Saviour

Understanding the atonement in a way that avoids the implication that God is vindictive.

By [Derek Thompson](#)

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Introduction

Scripture uses many different images in describing how Jesus' violent death on the cross saved humanity from sin (e.g. redemption, ransom, sacrifice, legal justification, victory over sin, reconciliation and healing) but the church has not been able to agree on a theological explanation of the atonement acceptable to all. The redemptive violence characteristic of traditional atonement theories hampers the preaching of the gospel and draws criticism from Christianity's detractors.¹ The church needs an understanding of the atonement that is consistent with Scripture and whereby the violence of the cross does not imply that God is vindictive.

Redemptive Violence

How does the violent death of Jesus on the cross relate to human salvation from sin? Why must salvation from sin and death require the violent death of Christ? Why should suffering be required for redemption at all? Just because the consequence of committing sin is death, why would another death bring about reconciliation? Jesus 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?' (Lk 24:26). Was Jesus implying that there is a causal link between suffering and redemption, or are they only incidentally related?

¹ Some may not like the 'atonement theory' terminology. Alister McGrath prefers to discuss the atonement under the heading of soteriology because he thinks "theories of atonement" is a cumbersome and unhelpful term (McGrath, 2002, p.330). I use the phrase to emphasise the provisional nature of the traditional atonement explanations and give freedom to explore alternative ideas.

The conviction that violence can be used redemptively is commonplace. Daniel M. Bell Jr (2009, p. 23) says, '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 people who use 'good violence' overcome those who use 'bad violence'. Bell says that even our language betrays the conviction that violence is redemptive, e.g. 'war on drugs' and 'battle with cancer'. The problem is not that good violence can sometimes be used to overcome bad violence (in a sinful world it might sometimes be necessary to use violence for the greater good) but that for God to require violence for salvation would imply God is vindictive. To be vindictive means to have 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 view the violence of the cross as integral to God's plan of salvation have been criticised as follows.

- a) They encourage victims of violence to see passive acceptance as a virtue because Christ willingly suffered for us (Mt 26:39).
- b) They promote the idea of 'good violence' for achieving some desirable result because God is justly angry at sin (Mt 3:7).
- c) They portray God as needing to use violence to avenge and overcome sin (Jn 1:29).

The Bible verses in brackets after each point are often used by those support who deem violence as sometimes being necessary.

Joachim Molander (2009, p.195) has argued for what he calls 'atonement retributivism', not in order to justify punishment, but to see punishment as part of a conceptual puzzle where punishment operates alongside confession, penance, forgiveness and reconciliation. He said that '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, and in the case of the atonement, is not conducive to seeing God as gracious or merciful.

Christopher Bennett (2002, p. 163) has argued that retribution can have a restorative function in reconciling persons who are alienated because of moral guilt. It can also have the opposite effect. The mere possibility of violence being redemptive in some instances, does not justify its general use by humans, and certainly not by God.

Not every instance of anger is vindictive, and not all violence is unjustified. Even if it may be argued that God has good reason to be angry and judge with violence the evil-doers who harm God's people, for God to require blood sacrifice in order to save people is a quite a different matter. Lisa Cahill (2007, p. 428) points out, 'Nowhere in the New Testament does forgiveness depend on punishment or retribution.'²

Traditional Atonement Theories

J. Denny Weaver (2001, p. 172) said, 'If Christians are uncomfortable with Christianity as a violent religion, the first step is to recognise the extent to which formulas of classic theology have contributed to violence both overt and systemic'. With that in mind, we will survey the traditional atonement theories, which may be classified under the following three headings plus a fourth classification to include attempts at combinations of the other three.

- 1) Christ the victor (Latin: *Christus Victor*).
- 2) Satisfaction (including penal substitution).
- 3) Moral influence.
- 4) Multifaceted (or kaleidoscope).

1) Christ the Victor

This theory (held by Origen, Augustine and Aluen) applies the battle 'metaphor' given in the New Testament to see **Christ the victor** in defeating the devil, not by power, but by sacrifice. On the cross, Christ defeated the enemy by giving his life as a ransom for sin. Although some theologians

² It is noteworthy that none of the editors or contributors of the book "The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views" discusses the problem of redemptive violence. Joel Green (2006, pp. 112-113) sees the wrath of God as justified. Redemptive violence would be an issue common to all the traditional theories debated in the book and not a point of difference.

thought that God paid the ransom to the devil, most consider this as taking the ransom metaphor too far. The violent sacrificial death of Jesus is integral to this theory's soteriology. Christ is the bait in the trap that reveals the world's justice system as being unjust and thereby removes Satan's rights.

J. Denny Weaver (2001, p. 171) proposes a 'Narrative *Christus Victor*' variation of this theory that says Jesus' 'suffering is not something willed by nor needed by God', but as Jesus passively submitting to death to complete his mission to demonstrate the non-violent reign of God. He sees the crucifixion as revelation. Colin Gunston commented that Christ did not just reveal something of importance, but achieved something of importance (McGrath, 2002, p. 328).

Weaknesses in Christ the victor are that in transferring the meaning of the atonement to a cosmic battle between God and Satan, it does not adequately deal with human responsibility for sin, and nor does it explain the continuing presence evil. This theory portrays God as outsmarting Satan by deceiving him, or at least using Satan's self-deception, to defeat him. In either case, this theory would portray God as being involved in using deceit, which would be a denial of God's goodness. No doubt, Jesus' death on the cross was a victory over Satan's temptation of Jesus to turn from God's plan for saving his people, but *Christus Victor* sees victory in terms of a cosmic power struggle.

2) Satisfaction

Christ's vicarious sufferings on the cross achieved God's **satisfaction** for human sin. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109 CE) proposed this theory, possibly influenced by his mediaeval thought world (honour had to be vindicated), based on the Scriptures about Christ dying in order to redeem sinners (Is 53; Gal 3:13). The satisfaction theory takes seriously the need for people to feel free from condemnation for sin but has been criticised for portraying God the Father as an abusive father figure and as being excessively punitive in condemning relatively good people to eternal punishment.

The penal substitution theory, popular in evangelical circles ('Jesus paid the penalty for my sins'), has evolved from the satisfaction theory. Its proponents are concerned to remain faithful to the Scriptures that link salvation with Christ's death. They argue that God cannot simply forgive sin, for that would

be to condone it (Morris, 1965, p.415). It would go against God's moral nature because God is holy and just (Packer, 2010, p. 9). It is because God never contradicts himself that he must 'satisfy' himself and deal with the problem of sin (Stott, 1986, p. 157).

I. H. Howard Marshall (2005, p. 8) does not agree that there is a problem with God's use of redemptive violence. He says that both God's wrath at sin and judgement of sinners are justified. They are essential attributes of God because he is fundamentally holy and loving. These attributes 'find expression in both love towards creation and yet also judgement and wrath when that creation is spoilt by sin' (p. 7). Marshall explains that wrath and 'mercy are both necessitated only when his creatures are in need caused by sin' (p. 6) and are both fundamental to God's character.

Thomas Torrance (2009, p.125) asked 'how can one die for another and do it justly?' Torrance sought an answer in the incarnation of the Word of God where 'God steps personally from behind the law and is joined to mankind' (p.127). J. I. Packer (2010, p. 13) cautioned that we should not think of the members of the trinity as separate individuals. Packer called the sacrifice of atonement 'a "wrath absorber" which quenches the judicial wrath of God'. This line of argument does not answer the criticism that in this theory redemption is only possible if a scapegoat is put to death as punishment, it only replaces 'divine child abuse' by 'divine masochism' (Inbody, 2002, p. 157). The emphasis on Christ's sacrificial love does not answer the question as to why the sacrifice was required in the first place.

The OT sacrificial system appears to support substitutionary atonement. Although ancient civilisations used blood sacrifice to appease the gods, Israel used it as an expression of faith. Daniel Bell (2009, p. 25) says that 'Christ's work on the cross is the divine refusal of blood sacrifice'. Bell thinks that Anselm and the apostle Paul have been misinterpreted and he proposes a re-interpretation of the satisfaction theory. Bell says that Anselm and Paul, if understood rightly, are not saying that the cross is about appeasing the wrath of God, but it is about the lengths God will go to so that humanity might come into relationship with God. Bell says that Anselm does not see the Son of God

as becoming human in order that there would be a suitable sacrifice for God to vent his wrath. Nor was it to meet the demands of moral order, 'but so that humanity might be restored to the place of honour that God had intended for it from the beginning (2 Pet 1:4)'. Thus, Christ is our substitute, not in the sense of taking our penalty, but in offering God the faithfulness, love and obedience that we could not. Interpreting Paul's comments in Rom 3:25 and 5:9 in the light of Phil 2:5-8 makes it clear that God does not save us using violence, 'but Jesus' obedience and fidelity.' When Paul says that 'God is just' he means that God is faithful to his promises and desire for communion with his people. Humanity perpetrated the violence of the cross, not God. Jesus fulfilled his mission of faithfully reaching out to humanity even when faced with human rejection in the form of the cross (Bell, 2009, p. 25).

Bell (2009, p. 26) was concerned that the logic of blood sacrifice simply lets us 'off the hook for our sin by deflecting the punishment for that sin onto someone else.' Bell says that 'Christ's work of atonement demands the rejection of blood sacrifice and the logic of redemptive violence.' He directs attention to Ezek 18:32, which says that God has no pleasure (satisfaction) in the death of anyone, and this would include his Son.

The problem with returning to Anselm's satisfaction theory as Bell interprets it, is that we would still have the ethical problem of satisfying God by the obedient life of Jesus, which included his violent death on the cross. Where Anselm emphasised Christ's obedience in the place of humanity's disobedience, the Protestant Reformers emphasised Christ taking the punishment that humanity deserved which entailed God imputing humanity's sin to Christ on the cross. The satisfaction theory implicates God in the violence of the cross if God's satisfaction requires Christ's obedience. The only 'satisfaction' a good unselfish God could receive through the crucifixion of his Son, would be in the salvation of his people, but the satisfaction theory directs the satisfaction in a God-ward direction.

3) Moral Influence

Both the life and death of Jesus taken together are a **moral influence** for discipleship. Peter Abelard (1079-1142 CE) proposed this theory because he

found both the *Christus Victor* and satisfaction theories to be morally offensive. He thought that Christ upheld the moral order of the universe by suffering the violence of the cross. Abelard emphasised endurance of suffering, Jesus' giving his life for his friends as a demonstration of his love (Jn 15:13), and for Christians to follow the example of Jesus' life (1 Pet 2:21). The theory is remiss on a number of points. It does not involve the resurrection or explain why crucifixion was necessary as a sacrifice. Although it calls for a human response, it does not explain where the power to overcome bondage to sin comes from.

The moral influence theory replaces the satisfaction theory's concern for God's honour and justice with a concern for the moral order of creation. Violence is part of the culture of a sinful world and Christ's incarnation, bringing God's Kingdom into this world, guaranteed that there would be conflict ending in violence (Inbody, 2002, p.158). This theory does not avoid the criticism that it may encourage people to see violence as redemptive and submit to abuse. A good God would want to do more than influence people to lead a good life; He would want to save them from death.

4) Multifaceted Approaches

Some see truth in each of the above approaches and try to combine them into a **multifaceted** approach. Many evangelicals see salvation as complex and say that although penal substitution is a helpful theory, it needs augmentation by other metaphors of the atonement (Morris, 1965, p.415). Joel Green (2006, p. 157-185) categorises atonement theories into those that focus on atonement as sacrifice and those that focus on atonement as revelation. He thinks that a kaleidoscope view of Scripture's atonement narrative is necessary to do justice to the different images.

Daniel Migliore (2004, pp. 182-187) suggested that Calvin's doctrine of the three offices of Christ, prophet, priest, and king, be employed to combine the three traditional theories of the atonement. Christ as prophet, teaches about the kingdom of God (moral influence), Christ as priest offers himself as the perfect sacrifice on our behalf (satisfaction), and Christ as king, rules the world, in spite of recalcitrant evil (Christ the victor).

The weakness of the multifaceted approach is that it does not provide answers to the problems of each theory. They are not mutually corrective as Migliore (2004, p. 186) suggests, and additional problems are created by the conflicts between the different theories that now need to be dealt with, e.g. the reason Abelard formulated the moral influence theory was because he found the two other theories to be morally offensive. A multifaceted theory of God that includes using violence against his Son would not portray God as being good. God is multifaceted in his goodness.

Traditional Atonement Theories and Redemptive Violence

The acceptance of redemptive violence is common to many atonement theories. Hans Boersma (2005, p.202) of the Reformed tradition says, '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 argument that fighting evil is not colluding with it may be valid in human conflict, but when applied to the atonement, it would be saying that God used the violence of the cross in order to fight evil. This would make God approving of the crucifixion of his Son, which is both an unethical and unscriptural position.

Henri Blocher (2004, p. 632) commented, 'The common charge levelled at the traditional view is that of unwarranted literalism'. The purpose of atonement metaphors in Scripture is to illuminate meaning. Over time, these literary devices have suffered the fate of becoming 'dead metaphors' which no longer deliver the original intent of the author. Robert Daly (2007, p. 36) said that the over-logical application of atonement metaphors leads to bad theology, which in turn leads to bad morality. Daly added that he was not just referring to Christians in past ages, but pointed to 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 for God's judgement to be dispensed upon non-Christians. Daly says that if Christians are to imitate God, it is important that they do not see God as vindictive or they will be too ready to accept or inflict violence themselves (p. 37).

Although there has been much debate by philosophers and theologians

about the metaphorical nature of religious language, it is nonetheless true that many atonement references in Scripture have a metaphorical meaning³. We need to be careful not to be too literal in our interpretation of atonement metaphors. For example, if we take Paul's metaphors of Jesus being a redemption price or scapegoat for sin beyond their limits it would appear that we buy God's favour from a restitution seeking God (Daly, 2007, p. 43).

Lisa Cahill (2007, p. 424) says, '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) asks, '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?''⁴

Alternatives to the traditional atonement theories have been suggested, but they generally do not meet all of these requirements. This has driven some to take the position that the redemptive violence of the cross is a mystery (Komonchak, 2005, p. 22). This position is open to criticism as resorting to mystery to defend a theory's insoluble problems. Is there an alternative?

Atonement Violence and a Non-vindictive God

Paul Fiddes (2007, p. 4) suggested that it is not possible to fully integrate the subjective and objective dimensions of Christ's atoning work. He claims that apart from the moral influence theory, traditional atonement theories start at the objective end of the spectrum and add a subjective appendix (the response of faith). There has been a tendency in modern times to move the focus to the subjective response to the objective event. Fiddes sees a tension between the Jesus of history and our faith in Jesus.

³ Linguists Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 486) went so far as to argue that all language is metaphorical and that metaphors are concepts in themselves.

⁴ McIntosh's (2008, pp. 109-110) own solution, which he entitles "Paschal Mystery," sees Jesus' death on the cross as climaxing a life of obedience, a complete failure in worldly terms, salvation being achieved by the loving will of the Father who raises his Son and shares the Holy Spirit with humanity.

This duality between objective and subjective applied to Christ's death and our response of faith is contrived by Fiddes to support his view of salvation as transformation 'to divinization, and from sin' (Fiddes, 2007, p. 2). Yet Jesus' death on the cross may be viewed as his subjective response of obedience to God. God's response to Jesus death of raising him back to life and the transformed lives of people of faith may both be taken as objective facts. The combined responses of the individual Christian to God/Jesus and Jesus to both God the Father and the individual, and God the Father to both the individual and Jesus are needed to achieve the individual's salvation. Introducing the dichotomy of objectivity and subjectivity into a central place in soteriology causes such things as God's honour, human obedience, justice and law to take on a burden of prominence they cannot consistently sustain.

It is better to understand Jesus' violent death as not being required by God for salvation and instead viewing it as incidental to salvation. In other words, God did not require the violence, but in order for God/Jesus to save humanity, it was essential for Jesus to endure the violence of the cross. For such a view of the atonement to be acceptable we will need to affirm that such terms as (a) the covenant of God, (b) sin and death, (c) faith and forgiveness, and (d) salvation can be understood in ways that are faithful to Scripture. Before exploring an alternative atonement theory, we need to clarify the use of these terms.

a) The Covenant of God

The creation of humanity in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26) has been variously interpreted to refer to such things as rationality, intellect, dominion and relationality. The poetic language and symbolism of the early chapters of Genesis suggests that we can reasonably regard the phrase 'made in the image of God' as a metaphor. Its meaning would be similar to the 'children of God' metaphor (Jn 1:12; Rom 8:14; 9:25). Luke seems to understand it in this way when he refers to Adam as 'the son of God' (Lk 3:38). Gen 5:3 uses the 'image of God' phrase in the same sense in describing the relationship between Adam and his son. When the image of God metaphor is applied to humanity it is simply an early statement of the

Covenant of God, 'I will be your God, and you shall be my people' (Jer 7:23), an image used many times in Scripture.⁵ Covenant is a metaphor for the strong bond of love that God desires to have with all humanity. Note that Scripture never uses the phrase "covenant relationship". I suggest this is because that would be take the legal term "covenant" in a literal way instead of taking it as a metaphor of relationship. Peter echoes this language when he refers to Christians as 'God's own people' (1 Pet 2:9).

b) Sin and Death

Scripture variously portrays sin as disobedience to God's law (1 Jn 3:4), unfaithfulness to God (Rom 14:23), and rejecting the word of God (Acts 13:46). Augustine (2009, p. 207) saw the root of sin as pride. Feminist theologian, Valerie Saiving (2009, p. 290), suggested that the root of sin is the self's attempt to overcome anxiety. Saiving (2009, p. 300) argued that pride is more of a male sin, whereas women tend more towards self-abnegation, both stemming from anxiety at the human condition. Sin has ramifications for all creation (Rom 8:22). Seeing the root of sin in terms of unfaithfulness has Scriptural support in Paul's statement, 'whatever does not proceed from faith is sin' (Rom 14:23; see also Heb 11:6). There is an advantage in seeing sin as faithlessness rather than lawlessness in that there would be no reason for God to require Christ's death to justify anyone's salvation. John's 'sin is lawlessness' (1 Jn 3:4) statement can be seen as descriptive rather than prescriptive.

Sin damages all relationships but in the case of the divine-human relationship, it has the consequence of alienating us from the source of life, resulting in death. God's self-revelation as 'I am who I am' (Ex 3:14) refers to God's self-existence and His being the source of life (Jn 5:26). This is depicted in the Genesis creation story where God planted a garden and grew two trees, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:9). The trees represented respectively, human access to life and access to the knowledge of what it is to be sinful. Since Adam and Eve did not lose their mortal life on the day they sinned as they had been warned (Gen 2:17), we

⁵ Covenant of God references: Gen 17:7-9; Ex 6:7, 19:5, 29:45-46; Lev 26:12; Ps 48:14; Ps 95:7; Is 51:16; Jer 7:23; 24:7; 31:1 & 33; 32:38; Ezek 36:26-28; 37:23 & 27; Zech 2:11; 8:8; 13:9b; Jn 20:17; 2 Cor 6:16 & 18; Heb 8:10; Rev 21:3 & 7.

may assume that what they lost was eternal life. Paul appears to understand it this way in Col 2:13 when he said that Christians were 'dead in trespasses' but 'God made you alive ... when he forgave us all our trespasses'.

Jesus explained what he understood by eternal life: 'And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (Jn 17:3). Eternal life has a number of aspects: everlasting life (Jn 6:51), abundant life (Jn 10:10), and a life indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:16). Thus, we can see the atonement as a means to recover eternal life through a faith relationship with Jesus.

c) Faith and Forgiveness

If we take humanity's being made in the image of God in a substantive way, we might think that God is like us, but God transcends us in every way and we should not think that God's attributes are analogous to human attributes. God's transcendence means that the relationship between Creator and creature is fundamentally different to relationships between people.

The Creator sustains the life of the creature and since God is holy and does not support evil, sin disrupts humanity's relationship with God. As discussed above, retribution cannot restore life (relationship with God), but nor can God ignore our sin. God desires life for us. God's covenant tells us that God wants communion with humanity, a restoration of fellowship, a reconciled relationship, which is what 'atonement' means.

Anne C. Minas (1975. p. 138) said, 'Only a human being can forgive - a divine being cannot.' She argued that from a philosophical point of view it would be logically absurd for God to forgive sin (p. 150). This issue is symbolised in the Pentateuch by ritual uncleanness (e.g. Lev 10:10). A holy God cannot have a life-affirming relationship with sinful humans. However, Minas' concept of God was too small. She had not considered the possibility of the Son of God taking on human form.

The relationships between creatures are different to that with God in that we are fellow creatures, all relating to God. We do not sustain one another's existence, but we can help each other live. Social Network Analysis, a branch

of sociology, has found that social connections between persons act like channels, conduits or bridges that convey information and influence between people (Kadushin, 2004, p. 31). We should not think of anything being materially conveyed, that would be to take those metaphors too literally, but the influence imparted is real. Things like advice, encouragement and trust convey 'life' to another person. Significantly, Prov 3:18; 11:30; 13:12 & 15:4 use the tree of life image to refer to life-affirming personal relationships. Similarly, faith in Christ is a tree of life (Rev 2:7; 22:2, 14 & 19).

God created humans as individual social beings in relationship. Unlike the relationships that exist between the members of the godhead, human relationships do not share a common essence and we are not self-existent. Human relationships are able to engage with the good in other people while not approving their sin because we are not upholding their existence. Humans, sinful or not, can be the friend of sinners. In the Old Testament, only Abraham is referred to as a friend of God (Is 41:8 & 2 Chron 20:7) and this was because of his faith (Jas 2:23). In the New Testament, we read that Jesus often called people 'friend' (Mt 26:50; Lk 5:20; 12:14; Jn 11:11). It is the prerogative and freedom of Jesus to choose to befriend and forgive sinners. Jesus did not overlook or condone the offence. When we offer forgiveness to someone, we are assigning blame to them. The forgiven sinner in accepting forgiveness is admitting guilt. Forgiveness and repentance are essential for there to be reconciliation. By this means, faith in Jesus becomes the conduit of eternal life.

d) Salvation

Paul calls death '... the wages of sin ...' (Rom 6:23a), God's judgement (Rom 5:16-17) and punishment (2 Thes 1:9) on sin. God sent his Son to restore eternal life to his people (Jn 3:16, 36; 5:21-29). This is salvation. Concerns about justice, battles with Satan, or making mortals sin-free on earth are side issues.

The incarnation restored the sinless 'image of God' to humanity in the person of Jesus, who God called his beloved son (Mt 3:17). God's plan of salvation hinged on Christ being the sinless 'image of God', Son of God and Son of Man, so he could be the mediator of a new relationship (new covenant)

between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5; Heb 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). Jesus was born without sin and remained sinless throughout his life. He was faithful and withstood every trial and temptation to sin, even crucifixion. Christ's resurrection and ascension means that we can have a saving faith relationship with Christ that ensures our own future bodily resurrection (Jn 11:25). Jesus identified himself as 'the life' (Jn 14:6). A faith relationship with Jesus immediately restores eternal life (Jn 3:36) and this reconciliation provides assurance of resurrection (Rom 6:5).

Sin is not a hopeless condition from which a holy God cannot save us. A ritual sacrifice is not required to appease an angry God, or for the sake of justice. God was patient in the face of humanity's sin and sent his Son to us (see Jesus' parable in Mk 12:6). The gospel that Jesus preached was about repentance and faith. Anthony Bash said, 'to seek forgiveness without confession, repentance and restitution is an oxymoron in the Hebrew Scriptures and in Jesus' day' (Bash, 2011, p. 138). Confession, repentance, restitution, trust and obedience are out-workings of faith.

The Crucifixion of Christ

Although the various traditional views are well entrenched in the denominations that hold them, their problems compel us to look for alternatives. If we use the above listed concepts, but refrain from traditional atonement bias, a different understanding of Christ's crucifixion emerges.

Jesus predicted that he would die so that many would be saved (Mk 10:45). Yet he could have avoided going to the cross. Prior to his crucifixion, Jesus said that he could appeal to his Father who would at once send more than 12 legions of angels to rescue him (Mt 26:53). When Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, he committed himself to doing the Father's will (Mt 26:39). This did not mean that God desired his Son's crucifixion. This would not be in keeping with what we learn about God's character elsewhere in Scripture. Jesus would have known that throughout Scripture God made known his will in the words of the Covenant. God the Father did not demand that Jesus go to the cross, but it was the desire of all the Godhead from the beginning to create a people who would enjoy, and benefit from, a relationship

with their God.

The cross was Satan's final and most fiendish temptation. The darkness that came over the land (Lk 23:44), even if it was caused by a solar eclipse, was not a sign of God turning away from his Son because he was somehow bearing our sin, but used by Satan to create fear at his Kingdom of Darkness. The temptation put to Jesus was to call on God to save him and leave sinners without a saviour.

Christ the Saviour

The atonement is primarily about salvation, hence the name I give for this view: **Christ the Saviour** (Latin: *Christus Salvator*). I do not presume to call it a fully developed theory. Nor should we discard the valid concerns of traditional atonement theories.

- 1) Christ's withstanding of (victory over) Satan's temptations were probably behind the original *Christus Victor* theory, but the human inclination towards triumphalism influenced this theory to evolve in another direction. After Satan had finished tempting Jesus in the wilderness, he withdrew (Mt 4:11) to try again to tempt Jesus to sin by using some of the very people he had come to save to crucify him. This is in keeping with Satan's character as displayed when he used similar tactics against Job (Job 2:4-5).
- 2) Jesus is the sinless human substitute, through whom God could relate to humanity. God was satisfied in having his people restored to him.
- 3) The cross is the ultimate demonstration of God's love (Rom 5:8) as the moral influence theory affirms.
- 4) By recasting the meanings of atonement related terms, it is possible to meet the concern of the multifaceted theory to maintain the truths found in the other theories. The Christ the Saviour view sees sin primarily as a break in faith entailing the immediate loss of eternal life. Salvation is about restoring eternal life. All of Christ's life was directed to this end, from his incarnation and life of obedience through to his death on the cross, his resurrection and ascension.

Evaluation of the Christ the Saviour View

Although the Christ the Saviour understanding of the atonement avoids seeing God as requiring the violence of the cross for human salvation, it needs to be tested against other considerations.

- a) Is justice served by seeing atonement only in terms of salvation?
- b) Is Christ's sacrifice as prefigured by the Old Testament sacrificial system critical to achieving atonement for sins?
- c) Is the goodness and mercy of God given priority over the holiness and majesty of God?

There are many other questions and objections, but I will only comment briefly on these three.

a) Justice

In the end, all sinners will be either saved or lost. A deathbed conversion is sufficient to inherit eternal life, but is this fair? Jesus' parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Mt 20:1-16) suggests that this is exactly how Jesus saw the implications of God's grace upon sinners. What of those who are lost? God destroys them all. There appears to be no scale of penalties commensurate with sinful behaviour and therefore little motivation to avoid sinful behaviour. God does not appear to apply degrees of punishment. Is it fair to destroy all unrepentant sinners regardless of how heinous or slight their sin? We must not overlook that the rejection of Christ is the most outrageous thing that any human can do. However, for people of faith, Rev 22:12 indicates there are rewards in heaven based on our work on earth.

So, does Jesus' death satisfy justice? The penal substitution theory sees Jesus taking the punishment for the sins of the whole world as a just means of salvation. However, punishment does not bring about justice. A just situation is one that is sin free. In human society, we deal with sin by using punishment as a deterrent to sin. Don McLellan (2005, p. 10) pointed out that 'justice cannot undo the offence ... and very often takes no thought of its ramifications on innocent people connected to those it punishes'. Although McLellan thinks that justice is inadequate to deal with offences (p. 10), he thinks justice is

meaningless without punishment and so reverts to the substitutionary atonement theory (p. 15). Each of us faces the reality of death. God's destroying and re-making of the world (Rev 21:1) will eventually remove (punish) all evil. Atonement is about restoring justice, but atonement does not imply punishment. Atonement is about reconciliation. Salvation through faith in Christ restores eternal life to humanity with the promise of sinless resurrection life.

Scholars have given much attention to justification in recent years without reaching a consensus. N. T. Wright (2009, p. 70) thinks the terms 'justification' and 'righteousness' come from a law court setting. This feeds into the penal substitution theory. Alister McGrath (2005, p. 22) however, sees the terms 'justification' and 'righteousness' as grounded in the Old Testament idea of rightness or rectitude, so that justification means bringing people into a right relationship. In the atonement, God was seeking relationship not payback justice. Wiard Popkes (2005, p. 139) investigated the meaning of justification in Romans and Galatians and concluded, 'Both texts interpret "justification" in terms of personal relationship.' This is because 'Meeting God/Christ is a personal encounter, effecting a new personal relationship.' The advantage of seeing justice achieved by righting the wrong of broken relationship is that it breaks the nexus between atonement and violence.

b) The Atonement as Sacrifice

John the Baptist described Jesus as the 'Lamb of God' (Jn 1:29). This appears to be a reference to the lamb provided by God to Abraham to sacrifice instead of Isaac (Gen 22:13). However, we need to recognise the metaphorical use of this phrase in order to avoid a pagan view of sacrifice. Unlike the pagan religions, sacrifice in the Old Testament was not a mechanism for dealing with sin, or controlling violence by violence, but an act of repentance expressed in a ritual of ancient near eastern culture.

God accepted the sacrifices of animals and grain in Old Testament times because they were offerings of faith. In the offering of the sacrifice the worshipper was saying that his livelihood and life depended on God, and the act of giving the best of the produce expressed the worshipper's faith that

these were gifts from God and that the worshipper's life was in God's hands.

The Levitical sacrificial sin offering only applied to inadvertent sins (Lev 4-5; Num 15:22-29). For deliberate wilful sins, in addition to a sacrifice, restitution had to be made (Lev 6:1-7) or the person would be cut off from God's people (Num 15:30-31) or, in the case of violating the Sabbath, be put to death (Num 15:32-36). In either case, God's forgiveness of sins involved a blood sacrifice (Heb 9:22) as an offering of repentance and faith (Ps 50:13). The blood of bulls and goats alone did nothing to remove sin (Is 1:11 & Heb 10:4).

The sacrificial system symbolically and prophetically showed that Christ's violent death could be part of God's will and plan for atonement without God endorsing or requiring the violence. Christ's sacrificial death was consistent with God having mercy on sinners and accepting the pain of rejection. God, in his grace, saves (restores eternal life to) those with a faith relationship with Christ. God did not require blood sacrifice for atonement. Human and demonic sin brought together atonement and Christ's sacrifice. Hence, the cross is a symbol of both humanity's shame and God's grace.

c) Goodness and Holiness of God

Opposing the goodness (mercy and grace) of God against the holiness (righteousness and justice) of God assumes there is some conflict amongst the attributes of God. It is as if God wants to save us but is unable to do so without also satisfying his holiness. If God forgives human sin, he would be condoning it. Yet Jesus claimed authority to forgive sins on Earth and did so (Mk 2:1-12). The evangelical church proclaims a gracious 'come to Jesus just as you are' message, but in its atonement theology gives prominence to the requirements of a judicial system.

The holiness of God implies that God is without sin and will have nothing to do with it. It is not possible for God the Father to directly enter into a personal relationship with a sinful human. God will not uphold the lives of sinners forever. The problem of evil comes about because of human sin but God will one day remove all evil. In the meantime, God made a Way for sinful humans to be saved. The incarnation of God made it possible for Jesus to forgive sinners. Jesus did not condone sin, nor did he sin himself, or impart life to our

sinful natures. God the Father acted in righteousness when he raised Jesus from the dead and the Father accepts the intercession of Jesus for his followers (Heb 7:25). By this means, God's goodness and holiness remain intact.

Conclusion

The traditional theories of the atonement (which some think of as the fundamentals of the faith) have serious problems. They give to some people the impression that Christianity is irrational and they portray God as vindictive. Denominational adherence to different atonement theologies damages church unity. The challenge to the church is in proclaiming Christ as our Lord and Saviour, to maintain that God is both holy and merciful but unlike pagan gods, does not seek revenge on sinners. The Christ the Saviour theory seeks to do this in a way that would be acceptable to Christians from different traditions. Its close association with the doctrine of the Trinity should not be a problem since most denominations include this in their statements of faith.

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All Bible quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Appendix

Scriptures Relating to the Atonement

I found it useful in preparing this essay to have all the Scripture references relating to the atonement together in one place. The Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version. My comments try to relate the passage to the Christ the Saviour view of the atonement.

Exodus 6:6. 'Say therefore to the Israelites, "I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement.'"

Comment: God delivered Israel without sacrifice. The death of the firstborn sons of Egypt was an act of judgement. The blood on the door posts signified the identity of the occupants as God's people. There is a prophetic reference to Christ's death as the firstborn Son of God and the Lamb of God.

Exodus 15:13. 'In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.'

Comment: This verse in the Septuagint says that God 'ransomed' Israel (as in Is 43:3 in NRSV). God achieved this without a sacrifice or payment of a redemption price.

Num 35:31-33. 'Moreover you shall accept no ransom for the life of a murderer who is subject to the death penalty; a murderer must be put to death. ³²Nor shall you accept ransom for one who has fled to a city of refuge, enabling the fugitive to return to live in the land before the death of the high priest. ³³You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and no expiation can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it.'

Comment: This implies the principle that punishment cannot be transferred to another person. Therefore, substitutionary atonement cannot be seen in this sense of substitution.

Ps 22:1. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?'

Comment: These words quoted by Christ on the cross do not mean that God turned away from his Son, but express Jesus' faith that God would not hide his face from him, as David confessed in this psalm (Ps 22:24). If God would forsake his son, there would be no assurance that God would not forsake anyone else.

Christ the Saviour

Ps 49:7-9. 'Truly, no ransom avails for one's life, there is no price one can give to God for it. ⁸For the ransom of life is costly, and can never suffice, ⁹that one should live on forever and never see the grave.'

Comment: There is no transaction that could restore eternal life.

Prov 16:6a. 'By loyalty and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for'

Comment: Loyalty and faithfulness between people maintains relationship in spite of sin. Jesus remained loyal and faithful to both his Father and to the sinful people to bring about reconciliation.

Is 53:5-6. 'But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. ⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.'

Comment: The Son of God came into this sinful world and endured temptation, suffering, and death. The punishment (iniquity) he endured was unjust, but Jesus remained faithful. The Father did not forsake the Son or transfer our punishment to him, but Jesus bore the iniquity of sinful humanity in order to save them. The LORD knew this would happen and therefore is said to have responsibility for it happening.

Ezek 18:4. 'Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.'

Comment: This is a problem for substitutionary atonement.

Ezek 18:32. 'For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.'

Comment: Daniel M. Bell Jr (2009, p. 26) pointed out that God would find no pleasure in the death of his Son.

Mt 26:28. 'for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'

Comment: Jesus saw his impending death as necessary for the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of eternal life.

Mt 26:53. 'Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?'

Comment: This verse reveals Jesus' willingness to give his life in order to do God's will (1 Pet 4:1-2). The sending of an army of angels foreshadows the judgement day envisioned in Rev 19:11-21. If Jesus had used his divinity to avoid suffering he would have forgone the role of Saviour. Without a Saviour, the world would have perished.

Mt 27:45 (Mk 15:33; Lk 23:44) 'From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.'

Comment: The darkness that came over the land is sometimes said to suggest that God the Father turned away from the Son, but darkness is better seen as the work of Satan trying to display his power and bring fear into Jesus' heart and make him give up on sacrificing his life for humanity.

Mk 10:45 (Mt 20:28). 'For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

Comment: The disciples had been talking about positions of privilege, but Jesus teaches them that greatness in God's Kingdom is seen in terms of service and that even he came to serve others. Jesus uses the illustration of slavery (vs. 44) to teach that his most important followers are those who are willing to become slaves of the others. Jesus does not change the subject in vs. 45. He says that he is prepared to exchange places with a slave, 'a ransom' being the price of a slave. Although this saying may be taken as a prophetic reference to Jesus death, it is in terms of the principle of serving others to the extent of dying for them.

Lk 24:26. 'Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?'

Comment: When Jesus asked this question, he expected the answer to be yes, and the way he affirmed it was by reference to the Scriptures.

Jn 1:29. 'The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"'

Comment: This is the language of the Old Testament sacrificial ritual. The lamb was killed (against its will). Its life was not offered in substitution for a human life as in pagan religions. Jesus' sacrifice did not literally remove sin from the world, but it removed sin as a barrier to salvation.

Jn 3:16-17. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'

Comment: It is important not to regard the persons of the godhead in a tri-theistic way, otherwise the criticism of divine child abuse arises. The Son of God gave his life on the cross in order to save sinners. Salvation is about restoring eternal life to humanity. People are saved through a relationship of faith in Jesus, the source of life (Jn 14:6).

Jn 15:13. 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.'

Comment: Christ's death was not just a demonstration of the extent of his love intended for our edification and motivation. He was faithful to his friends to the extent of dying that they might be saved through faith in him. Jesus' resurrection is essential for there to be a faith relationship.

John 16:33b 'I have conquered the world.'

Comment: Christ said this before his crucifixion. He had overcome temptation and he would continue to do so. His crucifixion may not appear as a victory over the world but must be understood in spiritual terms.

Rom 3:23-26. 'since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.'

Comment: The glory of God is his gracious love. To fall short of the glory of God refers to death. God previously passed over sins, that is, he did not punish them in the expectation of salvation through Christ. God's righteousness is seen in his reconciliation with those who place their faith in Jesus. To be justified means to be in relationship with God.

Rom 4:25. 'who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.'

Comment: Justification does not need to be understood as a legal term. It could mean Jesus' resurrection vindicates our faith in him or brings about reconciliation with him.

Rom 5:9. 'Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.'

Comment: The 'wrath of God' refers to death. Since Jesus was found faithful unto death (justified) and was raised from death, we can be confident that Jesus will save us from death.

Rom 5:11. 'But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.'

Comment: B. B. Warfield said that this is the only place in the NT where the word 'atonement' (translated in NRSV as 'reconciliation') occurs (Warfield, 1970, p. 351).

Rom 5:16-21. 'And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. ¹⁷If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

¹⁸Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. ¹⁹For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. ²⁰But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.'

Comment: Paul's argument here is theological rather than historical. Adam and Christ are not so much being compared as individuals from history as are sin and its consequences being compared to grace and its consequences. It is unwise to stretch any parable or metaphor beyond its intended meaning. Sin leads to death, while grace leads to life. Paul is not a modern academic theologian. Justification is not a doctrine to Paul. Justification is the making right of our relationship with God through faith in Christ.

Rom 6:10. 'The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.'

Comment: The Son of God's incarnation as a mortal human made him subject to death. Jesus died to sin, not in the sense of not sinning any more, because he was without sin, but he died to this world of sin that he had entered. Jesus' resurrection life is free from this world's sin, so he 'lives to God.'

Rom 8:3-4. 'For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴so that the just requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.'

Comment: This passage does not need to be taken to mean that God condemned sin in Jesus' flesh, but in sinful humanity's flesh (referring to death). Walking according to the Spirit (or spirit) refers to the Christian's life of faith in Jesus.

Rom 8:30-33. 'And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. ³¹What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.'

Comment: Christians are justified (reconciled with God) by their faith in Jesus because God approves those Christ forgives. God withheld nothing to save us whom he loved as his own children, not even the life of Jesus, so would he not save us, and raise us to everlasting life?

1 Cor 1:18. 'For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.'

Comment: The power in the world's eyes is power to destroy or control, but spiritual power rights wrongs and restores relationships. The message about the cross is of the extravagant love of God. There was no coercive power in the cross; and that is seen as foolishness by the world.

1 Cor 1:30. 'He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption,'

Comment: God restores eternal life and righteousness to us through our faith connection with Christ.

1 Cor 5:7b. 'For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed.'

Comment: The OT sacrificial system is often applied symbolically and prophetically to Christ's death on the cross, but we need to be careful not to extend the metaphor beyond the reference to his death being sacrificial.

1 Cor 15:3. 'For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures'

Comment: Jesus' death for our sins was to reconcile repentant sinners with God. How could God just forgive sinners without payment and not appear to be acting unjustly? The parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16) addresses this attitude that wants God to be just rather than gracious.

1 Cor 15:17. 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.'

Comment: Jesus' resurrection is a central Christian belief. God cannot be killed by human sin, and Jesus was not condemned but raised by God. The fact that Jesus is alive today means we can have faith in him and he will forgive us.

2 Cor 5:14-21. ¹⁴For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'

Comment: Love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet 4:8). The God of grace does not demand justice of sinners, God came in human form and submitted to death on the cross rather than condemn us. United with Christ by faith enables the power of God to be released into our lives to transform us into a new creation. When we place our faith in Jesus we start to continue his work in the world and to that extent we become the righteousness of God in the world, or Christ's ambassadors, as Paul puts it.

Verse 21 means that God treated Jesus as a member of the human race and refrained from saving him from the cross. So, not only did Jesus submit to death, but God the Father refrained from saving his Son. The Holy Spirit was with Jesus on the cross. We know this because the Holy Spirit gave Jesus a prophetic word that the thief next to him would be with him that day in paradise.

Gal 2:20-21. 'and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.'

Comment: We receive eternal life through our faith in Christ. This is the life Christians now live by the grace of God and not by some judicial structure that Jesus and we must adhere to.

Gal 3:8. 'And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you."'

Comment: Both Jew and Gentile are justified or made right with God by faith. Abraham's faith was a sign for the Gentiles. Jesus (Abraham's descendent) blessed the Gentiles by not judging them and sacrificing his life that they might be saved.

Gal 3:13. 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"'

Comment: Although this verse uses the metaphor of redemption, the metaphor should not be taken to mean that the penalty for sin was transferred from sinners to Christ. Jesus lived by faith, in obedience and love for others, even though this meant his coming under the 'curse' of crucifixion. This was not a transactional or judicial substitution, but a sacrifice motivated by faithfulness to God and love for humanity.

Eph 1:5-8a. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us.'

Comment: Christians were redeemed (set free from sin, reconciled with God, adopted as God's children, saved) because Jesus gave his life for them. This was the final act of a life of faith and grace. Note that it is according to the riches of the grace of the Father and Son that we are saved, not according to the obedience of Jesus to the law. The context is our gracious adoption into God's family and forgiveness of our sins.

Eph 5:1-2. 'Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ²and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.'

Comment: If Christ's sacrifice is something to be imitated, Paul must be referring to it as an act of devotion to God and selfless service of others.

Col 1:13-14. 'He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.'

Comment: There is no innate power in darkness, only subverted power. The enemies of God have no power except that stolen from God. The kingdom of God is here identified with the kingdom of the Son. Both the Son and the Father forgive us our sins. We have redemption in the Son because he became the Christ.

Col 1:20. 'and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.'

Comment: Just as Christ was involved in the creation of all things (Col 1:16), he is involved in the reconciliation of creation with God. Jesus' death on the cross provided a means for Christians to have peace with God, but reconciliation for the rest of creation awaits his second coming (Rom 8:30-22).

1 Tim 2:5-6. 'For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, ⁶who gave himself a ransom for all —this was attested at the right time.'

Comment: A mediator has a relationship with both of the estranged parties. Jesus' unique nature of Son of God and Son of Man, made him a perfect a mediator. Jesus knew the Father's love for the lost, he understood the need of the lost for forgiveness and loved them as the Father did, and he would give anything to reconcile them. Christ paid the price of being a faithful mediator, the 'ransom' price for those who would be saved. He did not purchase them. There was no transaction, nor transfer of sin or righteousness. Grace was costly to the Giver, but no-one received payment.

Titus 2:14. 'He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.'

Comment: Paul says that Jesus submitted to crucifixion in order that people might be redeemed and purified. Faith in Christ is accompanied by a desire for the things of God.

Heb 2:17-18. 'Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.'

Comment: The author of Hebrews uses the OT sacrificial system as a metaphor to help explain the work of Christ. Although God used the sacrificial system to reveal himself and his ways to Israel and it prophetically foreshadowed Christ's sacrificial death, every detail should not be taken as having meaning, either literally or symbolically.

Heb 9:12-14. 'he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. ¹³For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, ¹⁴how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!'

Comment: This comparison between the OT sacrificial system and Christ's sacrifice is used to explain that just as the Jews could purify themselves by their act of faith, Christians, because of Christ's sacrifice, are cleansed from a guilty conscience by faith (as opposed to trying to please God by good works).

Heb 9:22. 'Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.'

Comment: The temple sacrificial system can be seen as symbolic of Jesus' sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, but unlike the temple sacrificial system, forgiveness was not granted 'under the law', but achieved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus.

Heb 9:26-28. 'for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgement, ²⁸so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.'

Comment: Sin is not a thing that can be transferred or overlooked. It is a faith relationship that has been broken and needs to be restored. Christ's sacrifice 'to bear the sins of many' is about God's forbearance of sin in Christ's choosing to die rather than judge and, by so doing, open a way for many to be saved.

Hebrews 10:12. 'But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, "he sat down at the right hand of God"'

Comment: This is a contrast with the necessity of Israel's sacrificial system to continually offer sacrifices. Christ does not need to do that. His sacrifice was not appeasement of a vengeful God because of sin. His sacrifice opened the way to eternal life for the many Christians who would believe in him.

1 Pet 2:20-24. 'If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. ²¹For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

²² "He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth."

²³When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. ²⁴He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.'

Comment: Christians are set free from retaliating for sins and seeking justice instead of reconciliation. When we look to the cross we see how Jesus trusted God with his life so that we might be saved/healed. Jesus 'bore our sins' (vs 24) is another way of saying that he endured the crucifixion because of our sins.

1 Pet 3:18. 'For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit'

Comment: The phrase 'once for all' should not be taken to mean that Christ did not suffer at other times in his life, but indicates the comparatively extreme suffering of crucifixion. Nor does it mean that his suffering saved every individual who has ever lived. Christ's faithful life in the face of suffering was for everyone, that they might believe in him and be saved.

1 John 1:7. 'but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.'

Comment: When we live out of our born again nature and treat others with love and respect, it is because of Christ's transforming power flowing into our lives through our faith relationship with him. Blood does not literally cleanse anything, it is a metaphor summing up Christ's saving work completed on the cross.

1 Jn 2:2. 'and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.'

Comment: The 'atoning sacrifice for our sins' does not refer to a mechanism for dealing with sin, but the reconciliation with God that is available to everyone because Jesus endured the cross.

1 John 3:16' 'We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.'

Comment: Christ's sacrifice here is seen as an expression of love and grace.

1 Jn 4:10. 'In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.'

Comment: God's love motivates his grace and mercy. In the Son's atoning sacrifice, we see the love of God acting to bring many to salvation. See also comment on 1 Jn 2:2.

Rev 13:8. 'and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it [the beast], everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.'

Comment: The sacrifice of Jesus saves everyone who places their faith in Jesus and refuses to worship the beast in John's vision.