

Salvation as At-One-Ment—Substitutionary Atonement

I would like us to look more closely at some Christian beliefs that have caused a great deal of damage, namely “substitutionary atonement “theories.” These views have dominated Christianity over the past century, but it wasn’t always that way. Theologian Marcus Borg (1942-2015) points out that the substitutionary understanding of Jesus’ death “was not central in the first thousand years of Christianity.” Borg explains:

[The] first systematic articulation of the cross as “payment for sin” happened just over nine hundred years ago in 1098 in St. Anselm’s treatise *Cur Deus Homo?* [*Why Did God Become Human?*] Anselm’s purpose was to provide a rational argument for the necessity of the incarnation and death of Jesus.

He did so with a cultural model drawn from his time and place: the relationship of a medieval lord to his peasants. If a peasant disobeyed the lord, could the lord simply forgive if he wanted to? No. Because that might imply that disobedience didn’t matter that much. Instead, compensation must be made. Nothing less than the honor and order of the lord were at stake.

Anselm then applied that model to our relationship with God. We have been disobedient and deserve to be punished. And yet God loves us and wants to forgive us. But the price of sin must be paid. Jesus as a human being who was also divine and thus perfect and without sin did that.

Unfortunately, this became the primary lens through which the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament were read. The substitutionary atonement “theory” (*and that’s all it is*) implies that the Eternal

Christ’s epiphany in Jesus is a mere after thought when the first plan did not work out.

While animals were sacrificed in the Judaic temple, Marcus Borg argues that this “was not about payment for sin” but “making something sacred by giving it as a gift to God”; sacrifices were about “thanksgiving, petition, purification, and reconciliation,” not substitution. The temple metaphors of atonement, satisfaction, ransom, “paying the price,” and “opening the gates,” are just that—metaphors of transformation and transitioning. Too many theologians understood these in a transactional way instead of a transformational way.

Why would God need a “blood sacrifice” before God could love what God had created? Is God that needy, unloving, rule-bound, and unforgiving? Once you say it, you see it creates a nonsensical theological notion that is very hard to defend. What would God ask of me if God demands violent blood sacrifice from God’s only Son? A violent theory of redemption legitimated punitive and violent problem solving all the way down—from papacy to parenting. If God uses and needs violence to attain God’s purposes, maybe Jesus did not really mean what he said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5): “Blessed are the gentle, the merciful, the peacemakers.”

A note on the term “substitutionary atonement”

The phrase “substitutionary atonement” is generally used to indicate the most current iteration of the theory. Throughout Christian history, there have been multiple theories of substitutionary atonement. One of the earliest, the ransom theory,

originated with Origen and the early church. Closely related to this was the *Christus Victor* theory. The ransom view of atonement was the dominant theory until the publication of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo? (Why Did God Become Human?)* at the end of the 11th century. Anselm's satisfaction theory of atonement then became dominant until the Reformed position introduced penal substitution in the 16th century. This new view of substitutionary atonement emphasized punishment over satisfaction and paralleled criminal law. Today, the phrase "substitutionary atonement" is often (*correctly or incorrectly*) used to refer to the penal theory of atonement. This series touches the surface of 2,000 years of complex theological process.

Technically speaking, **substitutionary atonement** is the name given to a number of Christian models of the **atonement** that regard Jesus as dying as a substitute for others, 'instead of' them

Belief in the Doctrine. Many, but by no means all ancient and modern branches of Christianity, embrace **substitutionary atonement** as the central meaning of Jesus' death on the cross. The **Eastern Orthodox** and **Eastern Catholics** do not incorporate **substitutionary atonement** in their doctrine of the cross and resurrection.

How does the Eastern Church view and articulate the atonement of our Lord? This question arises from many converts to the Eastern Church, particularly here in America. Many come to the Eastern Church looking to leave behind what they may consider harsh or even terrifying notions of God unleashing His wrath upon His Son on the cross.

Does the Eastern Church thus employ a Penal Substitution model of the atonement? In short, **NO**, She does not. How, then, should we properly order these terms, and their application, to properly understand the Church's teaching on the atonement? A short gloss of the Evangelical concept of Penal Substitution (PSA) is that God required someone who was equal to Him in rank to satisfy the breaking of His Law, in order that He might remain just and that there be justice. In this view, God pours out His wrath upon Christ, wrath due to us in our sins, and since Christ is equal to God—since He is God—this satisfies the breaking of the Law, that first disobedience of Adam.

There are a lot of terms there, all of which are used by the fathers. However, the Eastern Church not only understands these terms in a radically different way than do Evangelicals, they are also radically different in their application. Let's go through each term, one by one.

What is our understanding of justice? *But further, Almighty God is celebrated as justice, as distributing things suitable to all, both due measure, and beauty, and good order, and arrangement, and marking out all distributions and orders for each, according to that which truly is the most just limit, and as being Cause for all of the free action of each. For the Divine Justice arranges and disposes all things, and preserving all things unmingled and unconfused, from all, gives to all existing beings things convenient for each, according to the due falling to each existing thing.*

St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *Divine Names*, Caput 8.7

St. Dionysios reveals to us that when the Church and the Scriptures employ the

term “justice,” it is not a legal term, but one regarding the proper order of things. Divine justice is the perfect intended ordering of the cosmos by God. Divine justice does not only refer to the pre-lapsarian (before “the Fall”) order of the cosmos, but also to the way God originally intended Adam to pastorally guide the cosmos. In the Crucifixion, we are given something more than what Adam had in the Garden.

St. Mark the Ascetic says, “Afflictions bring blessing to man; self-esteem and sensual pleasure, evil” (*On Spiritual Law 42, Philokalia* vol. 1).

In this world, what we consider pleasure is evil because it is a continuation of the unstructured-ness, or the limitedness of creation. But afflictions in this world are meant to eliminate this limitedness bringing all things to perfect order. This is what we call Divine justice. It would be unjust for God to leave His creation disordered, to leave us in this state. The only just thing for God to do would be to give us the means to remove this limitedness. This affliction some refer to as *satisfaction*, specifically, the satisfying of the progression to a possible perfect order. Where the non-Orthodox tend to use “satisfaction” to refer to something that affects or pertains to God having His wrath “satisfied,” the Church understands satisfaction as something affecting or pertaining to man. We see here that not only is satisfaction understood radically different, it is applied radically differently.

Why, then, does the apostle say that God is reconciled with man? (cf. Rom 5:10, 2 Cor. 5:18, 5:20, Col. 1:20-21). *But the gifts of the unfailing Power pass on, both to men and living creatures, and*

plants, and the entire nature of the universe; and It empowers things united for their mutual friendship and communion, and things divided for their being each within their own sphere and limit, without confusion, and without mingling; and preserves the order and good relations of the whole, for their own proper good, and guards the undying lives of the individual angels inviolate; and the heavenly and the life-giving and astral bodies and orders without change: and makes the period of time possible to be.

St. Dionysios the Areopagite,
Divine Names, Caput 8.5

The Superessential Power not only empowers all things - it resides in all things. Man is not only reconciled with Eden, with creation, but creation is reconciled *with* man. The energizing Power, which is God, and which was before the foundation of the world, is *reconciled* with man. Paradise, that bosom of Abraham, which is God Himself, which once spit out man, welcomes man. It “reconciles” itself with man. I believe we can even take this further: The Image, which is God, and which we have scarred, reconciles itself with man. The *nous* (*common sense, practical intelligence*), that great and wondrous conduit to things unknown, dark and dirtied as we have made it, is reconciled *in* man. Our actions, filled with the energizing Power, are one hundred percent ours, and one hundred percent God’s, thus reconciling our actions with God within ourselves.

This wondrous and great gift is also unmerited, which is why *Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other* (Ps. 85:10). Divine justice, that perfect original ordering of the world, with things living in accordance with their nature, is a direct

outflowing of truth: Justice is akin to an energy of truth, a perceiving of that which is true, and mercy is a direct outworking of His justice.

As St. Augustine writes in his commentary on the same psalter verse: *For if thou not love righteousness, thou shalt not have peace*, and as the Beatitude says, *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy*.

Some may say that this is just a re-hashing of what is commonly referred to as the Christus Victor model of the atonement, except that Christus Victor still suffers from the same Monergism, that concept that God gives salvation to an individual regardless of his cooperation, as does PSA. As highlighted above both in the commentary by St. Augustine and the Beatitude, these are actions that we ourselves must take. That is why the Eastern Church espouses a synergistic concept of the atonement. There are actions we must take. Apply this to John 14: *I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life*—they are intricately woven together. When you are on the Way, that is doing righteous works and learning the proper ordering of things, *which is Truth*, you are given Life.

This Divine Justice, then, is celebrated also even as preservation of the whole, as preserving and guarding the essence and order of each, distinct and pure from the rest; and as being genuine cause of each minding its own business in the whole... And since, without missing the mark of the sacred theology, one might celebrate this preservation as redeeming all things existing, by the goodness which is preservative of all, from falling away from their own proper goods, so far as the nature of each of those who are being preserved admits; wherefore also the Theologians name it redemption, both so

far as it does not permit things really being to fall away to nonexistence, and so far as, if anything should have been led astray to discord and disorder, and should suffer any diminution of the perfection of its own proper goods, even this it redeems from passion and listlessness and loss.

St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *Divine Names*, Caput 8.9

We understand the redemption of the world to be precisely as the establishment of a genuine and more complete relationship with God - the relationship that God intended when He created. Our love for the incomplete world, for this improper order, brings affliction upon ourselves. So God, because He is just, in His mercy sends His only Son to help us understand how to complete our state by redeeming and reconciling the world both to and in Himself, but also to and in ourselves. He invites us to become co-workers with Him in this great restoration, and, leading us on the way of righteousness, teaches us truth, and ultimately, grants us life everlasting.

Redemption is the result of our cooperation with God. How to effect this cooperation has been revealed to us by God through the Person of Jesus, the Christ.