How does the Atonement work?

An Attempt to Answer a Perennial Question

One of the basic questions of Christian thought is how Christ atoned for human sin. It is one that recurs over and over in Christian writing, both devotional and theological. Recently it has reemerged in disputes between those that believe only one theory of the atonement is correct and adequate -- that of penal satisfaction -- and those that believe this theory is completely wrong, does violence to our idea of God, and injures many who are or have been church members. I want to look at this problem more closely.

What is 'atonement'? The word actually means at-one-ment, the state of being at one with someone else. So 'to atone' has as its root meaning 'to make two people one, to reconcile'. A later development in its meaning is the idea that a person can atone *for* something, so that the word begins to mean making amends, as a kind of prerequisite to the unity. So when we talk theologically about Jesus' atonement, we are talking about something that effects a reconciliation between God and humankind, between the Creator and the Creation.

In the Bible, the idea of atonement is linked both to our sense of estrangement and brokenness and to Christ's Incarnation. The sense of estrangement and brokenness, given life in the myth of the Fall, is why we feel the need of reconciliation, both with God and with one another. The New Testament tells us that 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself' (2

Cor 5.19). That is to say, Jesus in some way provided the key, the mechanism through which the reconciliation took place. Because of that we know that the Incarnation is a necessary part of the reconciliation: it is the Incarnation that makes Jesus the Incarnate Word, and God's Messiah, or Christ. It also tells us that the impetus for the reconciliation came from God. We also learn from the New Testament why God was concerned that the reconciliation happen: John's Gospel tells us that God acted out of love for his creation and Paul's first letter to Timothy reveals to us that God wills for all to be saved. But none of this tells us *how* the reconciliation happened. How is the atonement accomplished? How does God reconcile the world to himself? The various attempts to explain this are the doctrines of the Atonement.

The development of a doctrine of the Atonement seems to have been prompted by the way that the early followers of Jesus perceived themselves to have changed, or been changed, after his death and Resurrection. The New Testament writings show that after the Resurrection the disciples perceived that their relationship with God had changed in a way that was outside the usual channels of the Law and the Temple system of sacrifice. They had been made righteous, that is, come into a right relationship with God as their father and Jesus as their saviour. But it was difficult to find an explanation for that change through the Law and the Temple. It is no wonder that part of their reaction was to search for models that would help them understand and explain what they had witnessed and what had happened. And they found many both in the Hebrew Bible and in the traditions about Jesus. No one past model could fully explain the new reality; instead Jesus' followers used various aspects of these models to explain various aspects of events.

What do the writings that became the New Testament and, before that, their tradition about Jesus, have to say about this question? There are three groups of passages that point

toward models for understanding the Atonement. In John's Gospel, Jesus refers twice to his being lifted up, in terms that make it clear that he is referring to his crucifixion (Jn 3.13-15 and Jn 12.31-3). These sayings also link his death with the accomplishment of his saving work. In the first, the result of the lifting up is that 'whoever believes in him may have eternal life' and in the second, Jesus says that when he is lifted up he will draw all people to himself. In the Synoptics (Mt 20.28 ‖ Mk 10.45), Jesus tells his disciples that 'the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many'. Finally there are the various accounts of the Last Supper (Mt 26.26-9, Mk 14.22-5, Lk 22.14-23, 1 Cor 11.23-6). In all of them, the cup is identified with blood of the covenant (in three of the four, the new covenant). Each of these three point us toward a theory of the Atonement. And they all point back as well to the Hebrew Bible.

This last case, that of the Last Supper, points to the idea of sacrifice as a basis for a theory of the Atonement. In addition to the passages we have cited, the Epistle to the Hebrews (which, though not written by Paul himself, seems to belong to a Pauline school of writings) describes Christ as a high priest of a unique kind and succession, offering an atoning sacrifice superior to that which was offered yearly in the Temple by the high priest of Aaron's line. Further it also celebrates the inauguration of a New Covenant. This is an important idea because it underlines that our atonement was, in the experience of those first disciples, achieved outside the rules and rites of the first covenant. Realising that through Christ God had established the new covenant about which Jeremiah had prophesied was an important step for understanding how the reconciliation they experienced had taken place. If there is a new covenant then it made sense that new rules and rites would apply.

Note that two different kinds of sacrifice are being discussed here. There are many kinds of sacrifice detailed in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in the Law. The stories in Matthew, Luke,

and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians describing the Last Supper all link the Eucharist with the establishment of a new covenant as well as with the shedding of Jesus' blood in death. So they seem to refer to the sort of sacrifice needed to solemnise a covenant. Such sacrifices are described in Genesis 15, when the Lord first covenants with Abraham, and in Exodus 24, when Moses and the people carry out sacrifices to solemnise the Sinai covenant. The latter passage even refers to 'the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you' and so appears to be one of the two passages alluded to in the Last Supper narratives (along with Jeremiah 31.31-4). But what the Epistle to the Hebrews is chiefly concerned with is not that kind of sacrifice but the sacrifices made once a year by the high priest when he entered the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16). These sacrifices made atonement for the sins of both high priest and people and symbolised the cleansing and repentence of Israel. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, Jesus is presented as a new kind of high priest and his sacrifice as that of his life. In the Last Supper narratives, Jesus is presented as a new Moses, inaugurating a new covenant through his own blood. So the New Testament writers had at least two different sorts of sacrifice in mine when they used sacrifice as a model for Christ's atonement.

The second group of sayings that we have cited uses the idea of ransom. In the Hebrew Bible a *go'el*, or redeeemer is a close male relative who in accordance with Torah and local custom has the right and responsibility to ransom or redeem property and family members from claims due to debt or slavery (see Lev 25, Num 35, Deut 25 and compare the character and actions of Boaz in Ruth). God, having established a covenant relationship with Israel, redeems the people, considered as God's firstborn, from slavery in Egypt and from captivity in Babylon. In the same way Jesus, considered as our brother in the flesh, redeems humanity from the power of sin and death.

The first group of saying, from the Fourth Gospel, points toward what is sometimes called the moral example model for the Atonement. These sayings allude to the events narrated in Numbers 21.4-9. When the people were being bitten by serpents sent as a punishment by God, God ordered Moses to make a serpent figure out of bronze and put it on a pole. The sight of the serpent counteracted the bites and caused those that looked at it to live. In the same way, Jesus said in the first passage, when the Son of Man is lifted up, those that believe in him, that is, those that trust in him, will have eternal life. In the second saying, Jesus spoke of drawing all people to him when he was lifted up. Clearly in these texts, the crucifixion is shown as focussing attention on Jesus and his death in a way that changed people: it made eternal life accessible to them and caused them to be drawn into relationship with Jesus. The Fourth Gospel has at its core the idea of relationship: the relationship between the Father and the Son, between the Son and those who put their trust in him, between Father, Son, and Spirit. It is about human beings becoming part of the familial relationship of Father and Son through faithful obedience. And it appears that for John being truly mindful of the crucifixion, in which he also shows that Jesus was glorified, opens those doors to humankind.

Another model for the Atonement (in addition to sacrifice, ransom, and moral example) is provided by texts from the Hebrew Bible which are closely associated with Jesus in the gospels, the Servant Songs of Second Isaiah (Is 42.1-4; 49.1-6; 50.4-11; 52.13-53.12), especially the final one. The verses Is 53.4-6 and 10-11 point to another model for the Atonement, that of vicarious atonement. They speak of one who brought us wholeness and healing by being wounded for our misdoing, by taking upon himself the punishment that we deserved. So by this model we are reconciled vicariously, that is, not be something we have done ourselves but by something someone else did for us -- Christ who did not deserve death has died in our place.

We need to think carefully about what this means. After all men and women, children and the elderly, all still die, and have done ever since the death of Jesus. So what exactly does this model claim that the death of Jesus has accomplished? Paul points toward an answer to this question in the fifth and sixth chapters of Romans, demonstrating that what Jesus has done is not to keep human beings from physical death but to break the dominion, the rule, of sin and death over humankind. This dominion, he showed in that letter, was the source of the estrangement and sense of brokeness that has plagued, and continues to plague, humankind.

One could call this penal substitution, since according to these verses Jesus takes upon himself the penalty that we owe, that is, death. And in fact this idea of vicarious atonement can be developed into the theory of penal satisfaction. This theory, first developed in the Middle Ages by the theologian and philospher Anselm of Canterbury, stated that despite the love for God's creation that God the Father has, by God's very nature God has an honour (or in other versions a sense of justice) that must be appeased or receive retribution because of the injury represented by human sin. Only the actions, specifically the sacrificial death, of Jesus (because he is both God and a human being) can satisfy the honour (or justice) of God the Father.

There are some difficulties with this model. First of all it is well not grounded in New Testament teaching about the Father or about Jesus: it is difficult to find anything in the gospels to back up the idea of a kind of insatiable retributive justice as a divine attribute, nor the idea of a divine honour that must be satisfied. To offer only two examples, Jesus' teachings undercut the honour-based culture of his own time with injunctions to turn the other cheek and the parable of the Prodigal Son undercuts an attribution of retributive justice to his Heavenly Father. Instead the encounter between the prodigal and his father points more toward restorative justice. And the

model is very pastorally difficult: it portrays the Father in an unpleasant light, to say the least, making God complicit in, if not the cause of, the innocent suffering of the Son.

Like penal satisfaction, many of these models focus on Jesus' death and its results. So it's important to remember that in the New Testament writings Jesus' life and death are viewed holistically. His suffering and death are part of a continuing process. It began with his incarnation, which affected the life he led. That life of faithfulness to God and service to humankind put him on the path that brought him to the cross. But the cross is not the end -- not of Jesus' life nor of the process of our atonement. Because Jesus' death called forth the validation and glorification of the resurrection and ascension. So although it is a convenient 'shorthand' to speak of his death as the sacrifice or the ransom or the act of vicarious atonement, in fact Jesus' saving work on our behalf is a seamless garment, made up of his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. We must give attention to all its parts. We should be wary of saying to enquirers or church-school children that 'Jesus died for your sins' or 'Jesus died to save you' lest we inspire a reaction of horrified rejection of the idea and obscure the fact that he lived and rose to save us as well. It is no more and no less true to say that Jesus died for human sin than to say that he rose for human sin.

So we have derived from the New Testament writings and the passages they allude to in the Hebrew Bible four models for atonement:

- the sacrifice model -- Jesus carried out some form of sacrifice (whether a covenant sacrifice or an atoning sacrifice)
- the ransom or redemption model -- Jesus ransomed humanity from slavery to sin and death

- the substitution model -- Christ suffered in our place for sins we had committed
- the example model -- Christ's life and undeserved death makes it possible for us to live into right relationship with God the Father by taking Christ as our model (see 1 Peter 2.21-5 in addition to the passages from John's Gospel cited above)

The sacrificial model lost its usefulness as an explanation very quickly, as actual sacrifices ceased to be offered in the Temple after 70 CE. After there ceased to be any living memory of the Temple sacrifices mandated by the Law, it was harder to use the notion of such sacrifice as a fruitful model. And no Christian preacher or missionary would have wanted to suggest to potential or active pagan converts that there were points of contact or analogies between the transactional sacrificial system they were used to and the covenantal system of the Hebrew Bible, But the other three models we've mentioned persisted and became the bases of the major theologies or theories of the atonement: The ransom, moral example, and vicarious atonement models all fed into the Christus Victor theory, which celebrates Christ's victory over sin and death on our behalf and the relationship between us that makes it possible for us to partake of his divine life as he partakes of our human life; the vicarious atonement model also feeds into the theory of Penal Satisfaction or Substitutionary Atonement; and the example model also influenced the Moral Influence theory, strongly associated with the renegade twelfth century theological Abelard.

Working out these theologies of the atonement was meant to be a way to take these various scriptural models and rationalise them as consistent and self-sufficient explanations. That process has led to its own difficulties in some cases, as ideas that in the New Testament are used as metaphors and images are organised into philosophical or theological constructs. Most

troublesome is the way that some theologians, especially the proponents of one form or another of Substitutionary Atonement, claim that their particular theory is the THE Christian theology of the Atonement, which one must accept in order to be saved.

One quick way to understand the theories is to look at how each one supposes that the reconciliation between God and humanity was accomplished. In the Christus Victor or Ransom theory, the Father and the Son work together to free humanity from the power of sin and death by defeating those powers. So in that theory it is the human condition that changes: no longer enslaved to sin and death, or even to the Law, human beings are free to return to the right relationship with God for which they were intended. In Substitutionary Atonement, the reconciliation in accomplished when God the Son suffers and dies, thus either satisfying God the Father's honour or the penalty of God the Father's justice. So in this theory God the Father changes His attitude toward humanity because of the actions of God the Son, and that means that human beings can once again achieve a right relation with God. In Moral Influence, Jesus' obedience and death effect a change in the hearts and minds of his followers, making it possible for them to follow Jesus' example and live lives of love and obedience to the Father. So in this theory, human nature is actually changed and freed to live into right relationship with God.

In all three theories the 'mechanism' if I can call it that depends on the Incarnation. It is because Jesus has solidarity with human beings as a human man and also has solidarity with God because he is God the Word that his actions can have such overpowering effects. The various theories of the Atonement are designed to help us understand how we appropriate Christ's saving work, that is, how we share in it and make it ours. The best summation of the Atonement is, I believe, still Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5.16-21:

16 From 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.