

THE NATURE OF THE ATONEMENT

Book Review

by

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Debates over the work of Christ on the cross and what his death and resurrection mean to humanity fill theology books around the world. The two more popular camps in this debate are that of the Calvinists and the Arminianists. One of the more controversial facets of the debate revolves around the nature of the atonement. Scholars argue over what Christ's work does, how it works, and how man benefits from the cross. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, both professors of theology at Bethel University, offer this entry into this debate by inviting scholars to defend and critique four teachings regarding the atonement: *Christus Victor*, penal substitutionary, healing, and kaleidoscopic.

Summary

Beilby and Eddy begin the work with their introduction in which they express the purpose of the book, namely, to encourage discussion (20) about the work of Christ (9). The context for such a work is the recent rise of debates stemming from liberal theologies and a desire to obtain a more accurate understanding of the atonement (9-11). The format follows a standard debate format, with each author presenting his argument followed by rebuttals from the other participants.

Gregory Boyd begins by arguing for the *Christus Victor* view as the paramount model of the atonement (23-49). He begins by pointing out the spiritual motif that permeates all scripture (25-26). Next, he explains how Jesus overcame and expelled

Satan and his evil kingdom (30-32). Salvation, he argues, is deliverance from Satan's rule and power (32-35) and that man continues fighting this spiritual battle by living for Christ and his kingdom (40). Finally, he states that all other models fit the *Christus Victor* model, though some are redefined to ensure conformity (42-45).

The next essay, presented by Thomas Schreiner, discusses the penal substitutionary model (67-98). The case for this model is made using five arguments. First, that only penal substitution satisfies man's need caused by his sinfulness (73-76). Second, this model is central to revealing and ensuring God's holiness (77-82). Third, the sacrifice of Christ in order to satisfy God's judgment of sin shows the centrality of the penal substitution model (82-88). Fourth, only this model places the focus on God rather than man or Satan (93). Fifth, if there is no penal substitution, then God denies his very being by denying his righteousness and, therefore, cannot be God (94).

Bruce Reichenbach presents the third model defining the atonement: atonement as healing (117-42). Six arguments are presented to prove this as the central model. First, man's sinfulness makes him sick spiritually, physically, economically, politically, socially, and environmentally (119-20). Second, "sin begets suffering and calamity" (121-23). Third, God directly and indirectly brings about sickness due to sin and, therefore, only God can heal the sickness (124-26). Fourth, Christ took sin, sickness, and calamity upon himself at the cross (128-29). Fifth, atonement as healing both (a) restores broken relationships between God and man and (b) removes sickness in the final kingdom (129-30). Sixth, Reichenbach states that only this model maintains a "holistic view of man" by incorporating spiritual and physical sickness (138-41).

The final view, the kaleidoscopic model, is presented by Joel Green (157-85). Five arguments are offered to prove the centrality of this model to understanding the atonement. First, the atonement must be considered within both the contexts of history and the transcendent will of God (157-65). Second, the scriptures show the wide variety of purposes found in the atonement (166-68). Third, the church historically accepted various views of the atonement (168-69). Fourth, numerous “images” are presented in the scriptures when one considers its application to relationship restoration and various cultural interpretations (169-71). Fifth, he shows how other models fit easily into the kaleidoscopic model (171-84).

Critical Evaluation

Beilby and Eddy’s entry into the debate over the atonement provides useful insights into four of the major views of the atonement. However, due to the brevity of the work, each argument leaves critical questions unanswered and, as a result, does not fully accomplish the objective to discuss the “saving work of Jesus” (9). This evaluation will examine key weaknesses of each argument followed by a brief summary of the book’s overall strengths. Although each author responded to the other essays, these responses will not be considered in the discussion of the weaknesses in this review.

Christus Victor Model

This model, as presented by Boyd, rightly highlights the spiritual warfare between the Triune God and the powers of Satan and his followers. However, his argument overemphasizes this battle at the expense of the victory over sin already possessed by God. The presentation of an ongoing cosmic battle between good and evil (25-26) resembles the yin-yang concept where good and evil reside in an eternal struggle

for mankind. By defining salvation as freedom from the power of Satan (31-32) and not from death or hell (35), one recognizes a teaching resembling the philosophy behind “Star Wars.”¹ Furthermore, this makes man no longer responsible for sin, but merely victims of Satan (68). The consequence is that God is unjust to hold man accountable for things that are the fault of Satan’s control and power (51-52).

The second weakness comes in his argument that man, by living for Christ, continues to fight this ongoing battle (40). However, if Christ defeated Satan, to presume the battle continues is to nullify the victory of Christ over Satan. One is left asking whether Satan is defeated by Christ or by man living in Christ.

The third weakness is that Boyd never outlines how man obtains salvation. Since this book is intended to understand the saving work of Christ (9), one must wonder why the critical aspect of how salvation is obtained by man is not mentioned. As a result, it appears that the *Christus Victor* model as presented opens the door to universalism. Since Satan is defeated, all humans are free from his power without the need for faith. However, a fuller discussion of how the atonement is applied to mankind would resolve this problematic conclusion.

Penal Substitutionary Model

Schreiner’s well-presented argument contains only two primary weaknesses. First, he fails to give proper credit to other views, though he does acknowledge that penal substitution is not the sole model (67). As a result, the overemphasis on penal

¹ “Star Wars” shows how evil and good struggle for power and, through the work of the promised one, Anakin, and his son, Luke, man is freed from the “dark side of the force.” Boyd’s argument strongly resembles this type of struggle.

substitution results in a God that appears more vengeful than loving, especially since Schreiner defines God's love in relation to his justice (67). However, love is also related to God's grace (Eph 2:8-9), Jesus' self sacrifice (Rom 5:8), and God's desire to save man (Luke 19:10; Rom 6:23).

The second weakness is the same as in the first essay: a lack of discussion regarding the application of the atonement to man. How does a person become saved? What distinguishes a saved person from an unsaved person? These questions are not adequately addressed.

Healing Model

Three central weaknesses hinder the argument presented for this model. First, Reichenbach argues against himself when he says that "sin begets suffering and calamity" but does not "result" in them (122-23) and then states that the atonement "address[es] both the condition [sin] and the result [sickness]." Sickness cannot be both a result and not a result of sin. Logic dictates that something cannot be both A and non-A simultaneously. However, Reichenbach holds that sickness is both the result of sin and not the result of sin.

The second critical weakness is acknowledged by the author. He admits that some say that physical healing should be available in the present day to all who believe (138). However, he responds by saying that Isaiah 53 uses "heal" figuratively and not literally. Therefore, while forgiveness is permanent, healing is not (138-39). Despite his attempt to rebut his detractors regarding physical healing, his argument does not answer the question of why some become saved and never experience healing. Further, if

healing is granted by salvation, but that healing only comes in the future, then he cannot hold that salvation is granted now and not only in the future.

The final weakness, as mentioned with the first two, is the lack of teaching regarding how the atonement is applied to individuals. Little is said regarding faith. As a result, it is unclear how a person experiences the benefits of the atonement.

Kaleidoscopic Model

The argument presented by Green for the kaleidoscopic model contains two weaknesses and one definite strength. The first weakness is that the model is too broad in scope to be viewed as a model. A model of the atonement should seek to explain Jesus' work. Instead, the kaleidoscope model recognizes no model as central and places all as equal in stature (185). In other words, it is not a model, but simply a collection of models. After reading Green's argument, one understands that the atonement does many things. However, the reader remains unsure as to exactly what it does for the individual or mankind. This model may be adequately described as precisely generalized teaching. In other words, it attempts to describe the intricate details of the atonement, but does so by viewing all models generally.

The second weakness is the same found in the first three models. Green does not provide adequate teaching regarding the relationship between individuals and the atonement. One does not learn from his essay how the atonement saves individuals.

Green's argument provides a critical strength that, ironically, is also his first weakness. Unlike the first three, Green's model recognizes all aspects of the atonement equally. This view allows all the attributes of God to come into play without sacrificing

one for another. God is not seen as a God of liberation, justice, or healing. Instead, he is seen as all these and more; he is portrayed holistically.

Overall Strengths

This contribution to the atonement debate provides a welcome insight by allowing the reader to understand the fundamental arguments without the need to tackle hundreds of books. The greatest strength of this work is the debate format employed. By offering both the primary arguments and the responses, readers gain a deeper understanding of the nature of the atonement debate. The style challenges readers, but does not lose them in theological jargon. As a result, the editors accomplish their objective to “promote dialogue” (20).

Conclusion

Beilby and Eddy’s contribution to the atonement debate, *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, is a welcome entry. Readers grasp the fundamental arguments and rebuttals of four dominant views. The lack of a Calvinism/Arminianism debate is a breath of fresh air, keeping the debate focused on scripture and God’s revelation.

Wayne Grudem asks, “was there any other way for God to save human beings than by sending his Son to die on our place?”² After reading the four essays and Grudem’s response, one is left to conclude that sin and its consequence required Christ’s death to pay sin’s penalty and save mankind. This required that justice be served in order to maintain God’s righteousness (see Heb 9:22). Only the penal substitutionary model emphasizes the need for Christ’s death in relation to sin, mankind, justice, and grace.

²Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 569.

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