

Church of the Atonement

The Doctrine of the Atonement

The Atonement of Jesus Christ is important to our church. It is not only our name – it is the core of God’s work for us in the Savior of the world. This paper will give some theological and Scriptural background to the teaching of the atonement, what it means for our lives, and what it means for our church.

Summary

Atonement is an English word specially created to talk about Jesus. It describes, literally, how people can be “at one” with God. How? Simply put: through Jesus, God’s Son. But more importantly, this happens through the life of Jesus as it applies to our lives:

Incarnation: The Son of God became a human, and God’s nature united to human nature. Through Jesus, we humans can be united to God.

Suffering and Death: Jesus Christ died for sinners, paying for their sins so they might not be under a curse, but be in new life.

Resurrection: The same Holy Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead also gives new life to us.

Ascension: Jesus returned to heaven in order to present us, trusting in him, to God our Maker.

Sending of the Holy Spirit: God’s Spirit and power are going throughout the world, calling men and women and transforming them to be sons and daughters of the living God.

Second Coming: We will be fully “at one” with God, when heaven and earth are joined back together and we are in the presence of our loving Lord.

All parts are necessary, but the death of Jesus is very important in the atonement. “By his blood” we are brought near to God. Jesus offered his own body as a sacrifice for sins, so that we might be forgiven and pure and holy before our holy Father.

What does it mean? In our lives and in the city of Buffalo, we envision communities and people with a new center: “at one” with God and each other through the atonement of Jesus. Despite what difficulties may come, it is the core of a fresh joy and vitality, undimmed by death itself. All of it we receive as grace: the atonement is what Jesus did for us. Trusting in him, we will be renewed.



The Procession to Calvary, Pieter Bruegel the Elder. 1564.

The Atonement of Jesus Christ

What does church have to do with the world? Does the message of Jesus speak to our core issues? How? Part of the Christian answer to these questions is the teaching of the atonement.

The atonement is At-One-ment.¹ Simply put: Jesus makes us “at one” with God.

One bald statement of this is in 1 Corinthians 1:30: “You are in Christ Jesus, who became *to us* wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” Or Mark 10:45: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Christ’s work abounds to humans.

What precisely did Christ do for us? What does it change in us, and what does it change in the world?

Moments of Atonement²

At Church of the Atonement, we proclaim the gospel from the various “moments” of redemption in Christ. The Scriptures can use any one of these individually to describe atonement, typically assuming all the other moments but focusing attention on the particular contributions of one. Notice how each moment is related directly to humans being made at-one with God.

¹ Many doctrines come from Scriptural categories themselves: predestination, grace, the church, righteousness. In these, we know what we are starting from – the Scriptural usage itself – even if the topic is not so easy. Other doctrines are categories applied to the text to make sense of it – the Trinity, the sacraments. The Atonement is one of the latter.

Even if some English translations of the Bible now use “atonement” or “atone” to translate Biblical words (such as *kipper* in the Old Testament or *hilasterion* in the New Testament), these English words were first invented to frame a set of Biblical ideas, not to translate a particular word. Indeed, *atonement* is perhaps the only major theological word derived from the English language. The spread of this word to the theological vocabulary of other languages indicates its ability to sum up shortly a large and important theme of the faith.

² In this paper we will work primarily from within the story of Jesus: moments of atonement. This is another way of organizing the three models that have been historically helpful in the Church: Jesus Christ as ransom/victory, example, and satisfaction.

- A. The Church Fathers often spoke of Christ’s victory over his enemies, using a battle metaphor. “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him” (Colossians 2:15). Indeed, “the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). Related, many in the early Church used the biblical category of Ransom, as in Mark 10:45 or 1 Timothy 2:6: Christ Jesus “gave himself as a ransom for all.” They typically pictured this as a payment made to release humanity from the devil, or from death itself. Ransom and Victory images can sometimes be combined.
- B. Jesus was also an example to us. We become what God wants us to be by acting sacrificially like Jesus acted sacrificially. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). Jesus had an actual plan for how the world would be different after him – by taking up the pattern of loving sacrifice he laid down in word and action.
- C. Satisfaction models indicate that we are in a debt to God by our sin, and Jesus pays or “satisfies” God’s demand upon us – he settles our account. Since the Reformation, the primary Satisfaction model has been Penal Substitution: God’s righteous nature is to judge our sin. In order to forgive it, His Son voluntarily takes up that judgment on himself, and God’s just demand on us is satisfied. “Every transgression or disobedience receive[s] a just retribution” but “by the grace of God, [Jesus Christ] taste[d] death for everyone” (Hebrews 2:2,9).

Some theologians see another model that encompasses these: Recapitulation. That is, Jesus undertook afresh the fall of the first man Adam in order to reverse the destruction. This is explicit in Romans 5:12-21 and the Church Father Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*, esp. book 5).

Incarnation: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory ... For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:14, 16). Jesus Christ’s union of humanity and divinity in his very person makes a way for us to be one with God. St. Irenaeus said, “The Son of God became the Son of Man ... so that man ... might become a son of God.”³

Suffering and Death: “And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled *in his body of flesh by his death*, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him [God the Father]” (Colossians 2:21-22). The death of Jesus’ physical body was how we as sinners might be presented to God as holy. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Resurrection: “He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence” (2 Corinthians 4:14). Jesus’ own new life means we can have new life now in the Spirit, and the fullness of new life with him when we are raised from the dead. This is not simply “life again,” but life in the presence of God.

Ascension: God the Father “seated him [Christ] at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:20-23). Jesus is now king over all that is rightfully his. Through Christ’s ascension into heaven as the ruler of this world, he also “seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6), drawing us into a place of honor in his heavenly kingdom.

Sending of the Holy Spirit: “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Romans 8:9-10). The Son of God sent the Holy Spirit to actualize his own work into the world (John 14:16,26). The world is being changed as Jesus intended because God’s Spirit gives the new kind of life that Jesus promised.

Second Coming: The completion of Christ’s work. “The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command ... and the dead in Christ will rise first ... and so we will always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). When Christ comes again, we will be at one with God forever (Revelation 21:3, 22-23).

Again, any one of these can be profitably used to describe what Christ has done to make us one with God. And any one is incomplete without all the others. In any one sermon at Church of the Atonement, you may only hear one of these focused upon to describe our being brought near to God. Within a couple of months, you will likely hear them all in sermons. Actually, you will hear them all in one service, as our liturgy prays and declares each appropriately.

The Core of the Atonement?

³ *Against Heresies*, III.19.1

Is there a key that makes all of this work? Can atonement be summed up more simply? Is there a controlling metaphor?

All of the parts are necessary, but the death of Jesus receives an outsized focus in the gospels. The story slows way down and everything becomes deliberate and detailed in this important point of Jesus' life. This narrowing of deep meditation directs our attention to Jesus' death as a core place of atonement.⁴ How did the death of one man have such an impact on us today, so that we "who were once far off have been brought near [to God] by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13)?

For us, the central human problem is sin.⁵ It affects us inwardly in our identity, outwardly in our relationships, and upwardly with God. Sin was addressed in the Old Testament through a sacrificial system, but the New Testament makes it clear that animal sacrifice was never enough in itself – it pointed to Christ, who was the ultimate sacrifice to take away sins (Hebrews 10:4-10).

Sin is primarily God-directed, as an offense against the Creator incurring his judgment (Romans 1:18-21). Through Christ's self-offering, our judgment is taken away. The righteous judgment of God the Father on our wicked sin, which belongs to his very righteous character,⁶ was taken from us as Jesus voluntarily took the judgment of death. "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 for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us" (Romans 8:3-4).

Jesus died to take away the punishment of our sins – death – thereby destroying the power of death and sin. This lights up each of the Atonement themes in Jesus' life:

Because Jesus would go on to atone for our sins by his death, he first had to be made like us, that he might heal every part of us. (Incarnation)

Because Jesus fulfilled God's will faithfully, he was raised from the dead. (Resurrection)

Because Jesus was raised after his death, we now see that he is the true ruler over this world. (Ascension)

Because flesh and sin were defeated, the Holy Spirit comes to fulfill Christ's mission around the whole world. (Pentecost)

Because Jesus Christ has definitively done what is necessary against sin and evil, he will certainly finish his work. (Second Coming)

⁴ Other atonement models also use Jesus' death as a focal point, but here we focus on Jesus' death as a voluntary, loving satisfaction of God's justice for us. As a theological source, it gives force to all the themes, which are all necessary for a full understanding.

⁵ Anselm, in *Why Did God Become Man?*, replied to Boso's belief that our repentance was enough in itself for God to take away our guilt. Anselm says: "You have not yet considered the gravity of sin." (Ch. XXI)

⁶ It is God's character to respond with justice against sin. But Jesus "delivers us from the wrath [of God] to come" (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Does this pit an angry Father against a loving Son? Hardly. The entire Trinity was eternally united in the one plan to save humanity (Ephesians 1:3-10). The Son is equally incensed against sin (cf. the "wrath of the Lamb" in Revelation 6:16) and the Father is equally loving (John 3:16). Together, they uphold divine justice against sin while providing mercy – God himself takes on death so that we might have life. The depth of God's justice against sin (Romans 3:5-6) and the depth of his love of us (Romans 8:31-39) are both incomprehensible realities that bring us to unspeakable mystery.

And because faith in Jesus Christ unites us to him, God considers us righteous and holy, too, and promises us eternal life.

Union with Christ: Faith is how Christ's Work Becomes Our Atonement

This last point shows us how faith in Christ has a spiritual effect on us – it unites us to him and everything he did, “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Ephesians 3:17).⁷

We become who we were always meant to be when we put our whole lives in Jesus: in his authority, in his mission. We are united to God by Christ's incarnation, our sins are remitted through his death, we are given new life by his resurrection, our lives are rightly ordered under his kingship by Christ's ascension, we live a new kind of life in the Spirit by Pentecost, and we will receive our full inheritance when he comes again – and when heaven and earth are joined together, we dwell in the presence of God forever. Amen.

Atonement as a Way of Life

Christ's death is a sacrifice that takes away the penalty of sin and takes away sin itself. But the Scriptures marshal *all* the metaphors in order to show how atonement affects our lives today. A new life in Jesus means a new way of looking at the world. Being made one with God means living a new kind of life, and it means a new kind of relationship with the world. At Church of the Atonement, we are being renewed in Christ and seeking the kingdom of God all around us, that all might be made “at-one” in him.

This happens in many ways. Atonement means being brought into God and his purposes, so our ways must become his ways. There are many implications for justice, community, family, vocation, and politics. We are working these out through prayer, inspiration, creativity, and hard work in our neighborhood. “New life” includes new motivations and a new center of love, which radiate effects throughout the world.

At-One with Each Other

Finally, our community is transformed in the atonement. As we just discussed, we as a group are carrying out the way of life that atonement entails – we work together on this common vision. But in Christ, our relationships are also actually made at-one with each other, as we are made at-one with God: “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14). This unity with each other is not just appropriate, or a moral concern of Christ's - *it is part of what he came to do in the death of his body.*

Unity in the Bible is manifested through love. The apostles consistently see this tied to Christ's work: “But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how

⁷ The New Testament consistently says that faith is how we can become united to God in Christ. The call to faith always includes repentance: Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15). No one can be made at one with God who does not turn from sin. “You cannot drink from the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons” (1 Corinthians 10:21). Faith and repentance are also acted out physically, as we are united to Christ through the sacraments. “*We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death*, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). And regarding the Eucharist, “The bread that we break, is it not *a participation on the body of Christ?*” (1 Corinthians 10:16). These sacraments are not separate from faith (and repentance). In them, God makes us at-one with him sacramentally, by the atoning work of Christ.

does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and truth" (1 John 3:17-18).

You see it in our worship every week. We sing *together*, we pray and confess our sins *together*, we receive the sacrament *together*: "Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:17). This is symbolic for our whole lives. The work of atonement means there is a new kind of community, where God's love is something to be shared.

Come be one with us as we are one with the Lord.