

§ 7. Doctrine of Christ

Lecture 8

The Work of Christ – His Death and Atonement

We've been talking about the person of Christ. Today we want to turn to a new section on the work of Christ. The operative question in the person of Christ is *who is Christ?* The operative question with respect to the work of Christ is *what did he do?* The work of Christ has traditionally been analyzed by Protestant theologians in terms of the three offices held by Christ, namely prophet, priest, and king. We want to look especially at Christ's work with respect to his priestly office. This is called the doctrine of the atonement.

The word "atonement" is unique among theological terms in that it does not derive from Latin or Greek, but rather derives from a Middle English expression "at onement" indicating a state of harmony or union. The closest New Testament word for atonement in this sense is the term *katallagé* which means "reconciliation," specifically, the reconciliation of God and man. Reconciliation is the overarching theme of the New Testament. Other important New Testament motifs such as the Kingdom of God or justification or salvation or redemption are subservient to this overarching theme of reconciliation with God. Atonement in this sense is at the very center of the Christian faith.

But I need to alert you to a narrower sense of the word "atonement" which is expressed by the biblical words that are usually translated by the English word "atonement" or "to atone." In the Old Testament the word "atonement" and its cognates translate forms of the Hebrew having the root *kpr* - that is the Hebrew root that then is differently inflected. The best known of these expression is doubtless *Yom Kippur* – the Jewish holy day or Day of Atonement. To atone in this biblical sense takes as its object impurity or sin. One atones for impurity or for sin. It has the sense "to purify" or "to cleanse." The result of atonement in this more narrow sense can be said to be atonement in the broader sense – reconciliation. But nevertheless, the biblical words which are translated "to atone" or "atonement" in your English Bibles need to be understood in the narrower sense of "to cleanse" or "to purify" if we are to understand correctly the meaning of these texts. Theologically, the doctrine of the atonement of Christ concerns atonement in this narrower, biblical sense, and has traditionally been classified or treated under the priestly office of Christ.

The message of the New Testament is that God, out of his great love, has provided the means of atonement through Jesus Christ. By his death on the cross, Christ has made possible the reconciliation of alienated and condemned sinners to God. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him

should not perish but have eternal life.” Thus the expression “the cross” came to be a metaphor which epitomizes the entire Christian Gospel message.¹ So Paul, for example, could refer to the Gospel message he preached as “the Word of the cross” (1 Corinthians 1:18). He also reminded his Corinthian converts in 1 Corinthians 2:2, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” So central to the proclamation of the Gospel message was the atoning death of Christ.

This wasn’t an emphasis that was peculiar to Paul or the writers of the epistles. The four Gospels devote disproportionate amount of space to Jesus’ so-called Passion, that is to say the final week of his suffering and his crucifixion thereby emphasizing the death of Christ.

Of course, Jesus’ death wasn’t the end of the Passion story. The Gospels conclude with Jesus’ victorious resurrection from the dead vindicating Jesus as God’s chosen one. The death and resurrection of Jesus are thus two sides of the same coin. Paul says in Romans 4:25, “Christ was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” So death and resurrection are really two sides of the same coin.

In 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, Paul quotes the earliest known summary of the Gospel message. It is a four-line formula which scholars have dated to within the first five years after Jesus’ crucifixion. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 Paul says,

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, [then he begins to quote this four-line formula] that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:11 that this is the message that was preached not only by him but by all of the apostles, and it is the message that dominates the New Testament.

Notice in this formula – in the first line – it says that Christ died for our sins. In Romans 4:25 that we quoted a moment ago Paul says that Jesus had been put to death (or literally in the Greek “delivered up”) for our trespasses. Christ died for our sins, he died for our trespasses. That raises the question: how is it that Jesus’ death dealt with our sins? How did his dying on the cross overcome the estrangement and condemnation of sinners before a holy God so as to reconcile them to him?

This is question that governs the doctrine of the atonement. In handling this question, I think it is important that we distinguish between the fact of the atonement and a theory of the atonement. There are a great variety of theories of the atonement that have been offered down through church history to try to make sense of the fundamental fact that

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Christ by his death has provided the means of reconciliation with God. So the fact of the atonement is straightforward. Christ, by his death, has made possible the reconciliation of sinners with God. But how this works is a matter of one's theory of the atonement.

Competing theories of the atonement need to be assessed in terms of two criteria. First of all, there accord with biblical teaching. Any theory of the atonement pretending to be Christian needs to be consistent with the biblical data about the atonement.² Secondly, they should be assessed in terms of their philosophical coherence. A theory of the atonement which is logically incoherent or otherwise philosophically problematic doesn't commend itself to us. We need to assess these competing theories both in terms of their accord with biblical data as well as their philosophical coherence.

Unfortunately Christian philosophers who have dealt in recent years with the doctrine of the atonement have tended to neglect the biblical data respecting the atonement. They are, after all, not biblical scholars, and so this question lies outside their area of expertise. As a result they often formulate theories of the atonement which, however congenial, don't necessarily comport with the biblical data.

So we want to begin by concentrating on the biblical data concerning the atonement and spend a good deal of time looking at that.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Kippur?

Dr. Craig: *Kippur*. "Kpr." It can be differently vocalized like in *Yom Kippur* there is a "u" but in the word usually translated as "to atone" it is *kipper* with an "e". The lid of the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies was called a *kapporet* which also comes from this same root – "kpr."

Student: [inaudible]

Dr. Craig: To cleanse or to purify. Good question. We want to be sure we get these meanings correct.

END DISCUSSION

Let's look at the biblical data concerning the atonement.

Theologians have often remarked on the multiplicity of metaphors and motifs characterizing the atonement found in the New Testament. The biblical doctrine of the atonement, I think, has been very aptly compared to a multifaceted jewel that can't be reduced to just one motif. Rather it is a multifaceted doctrine and a full-blown atonement doctrine must take account of these different motifs. Let's look at some of the various facets of the biblical doctrine of the atonement.

² 10:08

The predominate motif used in the New Testament to characterize the atonement would be the motif of sacrifice. Christ's death is a sacrificial offering to God on our behalf. New Testament scholar Joel Green provides the following very pithy summary of the New Testament data respecting Christ's death as a sacrificial offering:

In their development of the saving significance of Jesus' death, early Christians were heavily influenced by the world of the sacrificial cult in Israel's Scriptures . . .

If you are not familiar with that word, the word "cult" doesn't mean a sect or an aberrant teaching. Cult here refers to the ritual that was performed in the tabernacle and in the temple. Religious cult in this sense is more like liturgy.

. . . and by the practices of animal sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple . . . The expression "Christ died for all," widespread in this and variant forms throughout the New Testament . . . is thematic in this regard, as are references to the salvific effects of the blood of Christ [which has reference to the blood of the sacrifices]. . . Jesus' death is presented as a covenant sacrifice . . ., a Passover sacrifice . . ., the sin offering . . ., the offering of first fruits . . ., the sacrifice offered on the Day of Atonement . . ., and an offering reminiscent of Abraham's presentation of Isaac. . . . The writer of Ephesians [5:2] summarizes well: "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."³

This motif of Christ's death as a sacrificial offering to God is central to the New Testament data with respect to Christ's death.⁴

Let's look more closely at Jesus' attitude toward his death. The interpretation of Jesus' death as a sacrificial offering was not some *ex post facto* rationalization on the part of the early Christians of Jesus' ignominious death by crucifixion. Rather Jesus himself had seen his impending death in this light. Jesus predicted his death and even provoked it by his messianic actions in Jerusalem during the Passover Feast such as, for example, the triumphal entry into the city.

Jesus' selection of the Passover festival as the time for the climax of his ministry is no accident. This was deliberate. As he celebrated his final Passover meal with the disciples he says these words in Mark 14:22-24,

And as they were eating, he took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."

³ Joel B. Green, "Kaleidoscopic View" in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, eds. James Beiby and Paul R. Eddy (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), p. 172.

⁴ 15:27

Jesus evidently saw his impending death symbolized in the elements of the Passover meal. It was the blood of the Passover lamb that was smeared on the doorposts of the Israelite houses that had saved the Jewish people from God's judgment when the death angel passed over them and smote the firstborn of Egypt. Moreover, the expression that Jesus uses - "this is my blood of the covenant" - recalls Moses' words in Exodus 24:8 when he inaugurated the Mosaic covenant with the people: "And Moses took the blood and threw it upon the people, and said, 'Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.'" Now Jesus says, "This is my blood of the covenant."

Jesus, as the Messiah, is inaugurating by his death the new covenant which had been prophesied by Jeremiah in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Jeremiah says [starting at verse 34],

And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

In this passage God is presenting a new covenant that would bring restoration and forgiveness of sin.

Moreover, going back to Jesus' words in Mark 14, his words that his blood is poured out for many hark back to Isaiah's prophecy of the servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53:12. God says, "he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." Jesus evidently saw himself as the suffering servant of the Lord described in Isaiah 53 who, in verse 10, "makes himself an offering for sin."⁵

Earlier in Mark, Mark 10:45, Jesus describes himself in the following way: "For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." The Son of Man that Jesus refers to here is a divine-human figure from the book of Daniel 7. Daniel 7:14 says, "And to him [the Son of Man] was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him." In Mark 10:45 Jesus stands this saying on its head. In Daniel it says that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve the Son of Man. But Jesus says the Son of Man has come not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. He comes in the role of a servant, like the servant of Isaiah 53, and he gives his life as a ransom for many. Jesus evidently saw his death as a redemptive sacrifice like the Passover sacrifice. He saw himself as a sin-bearer inaugurating like the Mosaic sacrifice a fresh covenant between God and man that would bring restoration and forgiveness of the people.

START DISCUSSION

⁵ 20:14

Student: You astutely pointed out the difference between covenant and to be served and serving. Do you see each of those as two halves of the covenant where Christ served us and took up his cross, we must take up our cross and serve him.

Dr. Craig: I would say that with the second coming of the Son of Man – when he says he comes in the glory of the Father with the angels – then everything will be made subject to him and he will then reign and Daniel 7:14 will be fulfilled. All peoples and nations will serve the Son of Man when he comes in glory. But in his first coming he comes as a ransom, as a sacrifice.

Student: What I was saying is the only way people can serve Christ is by taking up their cross and walking in the Spirit.

Dr. Craig: Yes, fair enough. As members of his Kingdom we do want to live lives that are in service to Christ and to our fellow men as well.

END DISCUSSION

In the last words of Jesus at the Last Supper, as well as this ransom saying of Mark 10:45, we have a clear insight into how Jesus understood his death which he deliberately provoked. He saw this as a redemptive sacrifice for sin that would inaugurate the new covenant.

We can gain insight into Jesus' death as a sacrificial offering by examining the function of the Old Testament sacrifices which formed the interpretive framework for Jesus' death. So I want to turn now to a brief discussion of the Old Testament background of sacrifice.

When we turn to these Old Testament sacrifices we enter a world which is utterly foreign to modern Western readers. Most of us, I dare say, have never seen an animal butchered much less done it ourselves. Used to as we are to buying our meat or poultry in antiseptically wrapped packages and refrigerated bins, we are apt to find these animal sacrifices in the Old Testament revolting as well as bewildering. Moreover, most of us have no familiarity with a world in which ritual practices which were fraught with symbolic meaning play a major role in one's interaction with the spiritual realm.⁶ So these Old Testament rituals may often strike us as bizarre and opaque. If we are to understand these practices we have got to shed our Western modern sensibilities and try to enter sympathetically into the world of a bucolic society which was not squeamish about blood and guts and which had a highly developed ritual system for its approach to God.

The challenge of understanding these ancient texts is compounded by the fact that they often describe rituals without explaining their meaning. The meaning of these rituals was

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probably known to their contemporary practitioners but we don't have that advantage. So we have to try as best as we can to discern the proper interpretation of these practices based upon the clues that we have. Fortunately, I think we do have sufficient evidence to form some reliable idea about how these Old Testament sacrifices functioned.

The Old Testament sacrifices come in a bewildering variety, the distinctive functions of which are not always clear. Fortunately, I think we can determine the general function of these sacrifices without going into a delineation of the various kinds of sacrifices that were prescribed. In general, the sacrifices served the twin fundamental purposes of the expiation of sin and the propitiation of God. The word "expiate" means to cleanse or to purify. The word "propitiate" means to appease or placate or satisfy. The purpose of expiation is to cleanse or purify from sin and impurity. The object of propitiation is God – to appease or satisfy God's wrath or justice. It is important to keep these two notions distinct. The object of expiation is sin or impurity; the object of propitiation is God.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I understand that the Greek Orthodox church has a different view of propitiation. There has also been some people who have said, *Is this trying to appease and angry God?* They don't like the doctrine of it. Maybe I am getting way ahead of things. Maybe we will go into that later.

Dr. Craig: I think that you are making a very good point. Many people, many theologians, are deeply offended at the notion of propitiation – that God is wrathful and needs to be satisfied or appeased or placated. Just this week I read a book by a modern theologian who very explicitly says the purpose of these sacrifices was expiation and propitiation. He is entirely honest in his exegesis. But then he himself says this is barbaric, primitive, disgusting, and needs to be rejected. But we are not to that assessment stage yet. Right now we are just trying to see what was the role of these sacrifices and even the detractors like this theologian I read recognize that an honest exegesis of these texts is that they do serve to placate or appease the wrath and justice of God as well as to cleanse and purify from sin. That is the only point that we are making right now.⁷

Student: Since we are talking about Christ's work, I tend to understand expiation in the sense of that was his passive obedience and propitiation was his active obedience. The expiation being he died on the cross but the propitiation (what really turns God's wrath away) I understand is Christ's act of work that he did.

Dr. Craig: I don't think that is accurate. You should look again at your systematic theology text or something because it is true that the crucifixion of Christ is part of his passive obedience in some Reformation theologians but that involves propitiation of God's wrath. His sacrificial death serves to satisfy God and so to allay his wrath. The

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active obedience of Christ would come in more with respect to the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us. His passive obedience in dying for sin takes away our sin, but then his active obedience of living a perfect and sinless life provides the basis for the imputation of his righteousness to me so that that is credited to my account. But, again, that is getting ahead of ourselves.

Student: This is a question about the sacrificial system of Old Testament as a whole. Do you believe that the sacrificial system was symbolic and doing it was preparing the people for what Jesus was to do so that they would understand it better one day and it would help them recognize their own sin? Or was the spilling of the blood of these animals actually covering their sin in God's eyes and therefore they were getting forgiveness and it was actually covering, or was it symbolic?

Dr. Craig: That is an excellent question. I am sure that for most of them they thought that the latter was true. They thought that this is the way in which you atone for sin. But, as a Christian, I look back on these sacrifices through the lens of the New Testament. There it is very clear the author of Hebrews says it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sin. He says these animal sacrifices were ineffectual. Paul says in Romans 3 God passed over these former sins. He didn't punish them. In his forbearance God overlooked them, but now he has dealt with them finally in Christ. So I would see these sacrifices in the former way you described – they were in a sense foreshadowings of what God would do in Christ. They were effective insofar as staying the wrath of God and the judgment of God until these sins should be dealt with in Christ. But it is not as though they provided a final resolution to the problem. There I think we have to agree with Paul and with the author of Hebrews that these animal sacrifices really couldn't do anything to actually bring expiation from sin or propitiation of God's justice (or satisfaction of God's justice).

Student: That is one of the reasons why a lot of people believe that none of the righteous men of the Old Testament actually went to heaven before Christ died. They were in Abraham's bosom or something because their sins have not actually been paid for yet.

Dr. Craig: I don't know if that is why they would say that. I would say with respect to the state of the soul after death that no one goes immediately to heaven because that will not come until the final resurrection of the dead. Until the final resurrection of the dead and the Judgment Day, heaven and hell are not there for people to go to. There is a kind of interim state where the souls of the righteous dead abide until the resurrection at the end of the age.

Student: Am I correct in understanding that all of this centers around the fact that God created man, the pinnacle of his creation on Earth, and gave man free will, but instead of choosing him he listened to the devil and sinned with that free will. Therefore that is what

angered God because he had created this creature who sinned which then immediately separated man from him. It seems justified in his just being holy and just that would necessitate anger.⁸ He couldn't just overlook something like that.

Dr. Craig: A righteous indignation.

Student: Right. Therefore it led to under expiation that that was the culmination of that – yes he had anger but in his perfect love he therefore created a way to account for that and bringing mankind back to himself. To me they are very interwoven. In that light, it doesn't seem so repugnant that God has that anger. It seems perfectly just.

Dr. Craig: Very well said. Thank you. It is important to understand that in contrast to pagan sacrifices and pagan religions, Israel is not dealing with some sort of capricious deity who needs to be buttered up and manipulated into treating them well. Rather, I think as you say, people in a state of fallenness or sin fall under the wrath of a holy and just God. Therefore these sacrifices are a demonstration of God's love. They are God's loving provision for fallen people to be cleansed and restored into right fellowship with God. They are not the sort of attempts to manipulate this capricious and angry deity you have in pagan sacrifices. I'll say something more about this when we get to our next topic which is on propitiatory sacrifices. We'll describe exactly how they did function. But I think you have given us an excellent preview.

END DISCUSSION⁹

⁸ 35:04

⁹ Total Running Time: 37:49 (Copyright © 2017 William Lane Craig)