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*THE*  
*CROSS*  
*in*  
*CONTEXT*

RECONSIDERING BIBLICAL  
METAPHORS FOR ATONEMENT



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# RECONCILING ATONEMENT THEORIES



*Very simple was my explanation,  
and plausible enough—as most wrong theories are!*

H. G. WELLS, *THE TIME MACHINE*

CHINESE PARENTS ARE CONSUMED WITH WORRY about their children's grades. By the time a child is two years old, parents have planned that child's path to successfully passing the *gaokao*, the test that students take in their final year of high school. It is the single most significant factor determining whether students attend college. In a country with well over a billion people, competition is fierce. A Chinese idiom explains these parents' anxiety. They are afraid their children, lacking the most rigorous education, will "lose at the starting line."

This expression aptly captures much of the debate that surrounds the doctrine of atonement. Countless books and articles start in the wrong place. They begin with certain atonement theories in mind. They look either to evaluate or reconcile those theories as they are typically presented. To the degree a person tries to harmonize different views, one effectively assumes the truth of those theories. We too quickly debate already-developed systems of doctrine. The problem, however, is that we then "lose at the starting line."

Theories are necessary and useful. They simplify vast amounts of information. At the same time, theories often make ideas feel overly complex. They

can obscure reality as much as clarify it. This is certainly true with respect to theories of atonement.

I don't imply that traditional atonement theories are wrong and should be cast aside. Rather, it is possible to overemphasize certain parts of a theory and neglect other aspects. The virtues of a theory can blind us to its weaknesses. Taken as whole systems, atonement theories can seem irreconcilable. From the start, we limit the potential ways one might understand the Bible. We have three or four choices to pick from. In our minds, we tend to choose one outright. Or, at the very least, we rank them in some sort of order.

We are often ignorant of the role that context plays in shaping our theories of atonement. Our cultural context narrows the focus and scope of our theological questions. Because of our historical situation, we might ask too much of our theories. We expect them to provide answers not given in the biblical text. In defense of a long-held theory, we are prone to overemphasize certain parts of the Bible at the expense of others. We have a hard time separating Scripture from speculation.

### **WHAT ARE THE INGREDIENTS?**

The law of Moses placed numerous dietary restrictions on ancient Israelites. Shrimp, pork, and various birds were forbidden. By and large, the early church did not follow these regulations. Christians today enjoy a more expansive menu.

When it comes to doctrine, however, we find an ironic reversal, especially with respect to atonement. Not only are many Christians content with a small menu of "atonement dishes," they argue over which dish is most important or inspired by God. Historically, theologians offer a select group of atonement theories from which to choose. By contrast, the Bible never presents such systematic formulations. Biblical writers instead act as master chefs who offer a succulent buffet of truth even while using only a few basic ingredients.

Envisage a society with only a few meal choices: fried chicken, pasta, scrambled eggs, chicken and dumplings. In this imaginary culture, factions arise that claim the superiority of one dish over another. Debates rage about the relative virtue of eggs over fried chicken. By analogy, these dishes are like the popular atonement theories we've inherited from history. They nourish us. We are thankful for them. But restricting ourselves to these few options looks increasingly unnecessary, even harmful, the more we look at the situation.

Someone familiar with cooking will notice an oversight on the part of our imagined society. Each food item above can be made with just a few ingredients. There is no reason that people must restrict themselves to those specific dishes. With only flour, chicken, eggs, milk, and potatoes, we have an array of culinary options. For example, one could also make chicken soup, waffles, breakfast skillet, potato soup, grilled chicken, and a basic omelet.

In this analogy, the ingredients represent a small set of biblical metaphors that can be rearranged to form numerous doctrinal theories. Nevertheless, we tend to start with a limited set of atonement theories and *overlook the more fundamental elements that are common to each theory*. When discussing the Bible's teaching on atonement, we "lose at the starting line." The Bible provides a collection of theological ingredients, but we often don't start here. Instead, we settle for a narrow set of doctrinal dishes. Although nourishing, they do not represent the biblical medley available to us.

To put it another way, we need something like a "Taco Bell approach" to the doctrine of atonement. This popular, Tex-Mex inspired, fast-food restaurant urges people to "think outside the bun" and serves an impressive variety of dishes. The vast menu has tacos, nachos, burritos, and quesadillas, yet also includes original creations like the Naked Chicken Chalupa. Why do I say "impressive"? When you look at its menu, Taco Bell uses a relatively small set of ingredients and, still, it always boasts an assortment of options for customers. With respect to doctrine, we need to think outside the box of convenient categories. By delving deep into the Bible, we find a handful of motifs that combine to form a richer, more robust theology of atonement.

Our context largely influences how we combine biblical themes and texts. Church tradition, personal experiences, education, and culture shape our questions and assumptions. They affect what we see *and* what we don't. In church history, particular theories of atonement arose to explain Christ's death in fresh ways. Such formulations are helpful, but they are not our starting point. *Merely comparing atonement theories is a recipe for failure*. We need to look back at both history and the Bible in order to savor the fullness of Christ's atoning work.

## THE ATONEMENT IN HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

In appendix A, I provide a brief survey of several major atonement theories, highlighting their historical background and emphases. Each theory attempts

to contextualize the Bible's teaching on atonement. Still, we are left with a question: To what extent do these common theories of atonement reflect biblical logic?

Theology is not equivalent to biblical truth. Hopefully, these two have much overlap. However, we cannot assume that our theology—our understanding of Scripture—wholly captures the Bible's teaching.

We all have limited perspectives. We live in particular cultures and historical periods. No one studies the Bible in a vacuum. Our cultural, historical, and personal contexts influence how we interpret the Bible. In this sense, all theology is contextualized.

“Context” is not just culture; it also includes history. Different historical ages are different contexts. How does context influence our theology? Specifically, how do our assumptions and history shape the way we understand the atonement?

Different historical periods and subcultures have varying perspectives on Christ's death. Sometimes these views complement one another. At other times, they contradict. In every case, people's historical context influences how they explain atonement.

As I write this, the world wrestles with COVID-19. Before the pandemic, if my daughter developed a small cough and fever, we'd have given her some medication, kept an eye on her, and thought little about it. But in the context of the COVID-19 virus, we now fixate on her symptoms with new seriousness. The only thing that's changed is the context.

Of course, every generation has a limited vantage point. We all have blind spots. This is as true for theology as it is with medicine. Just a hundred years ago, doctors recommended drinking radium to cure arthritis and impotence. We need people from other generations to give us an alternative perspective. They challenge our modern assumptions and priorities. By studying history, we dialogue with historical thinkers. Historical views of atonement inevitably affect our interpretations. Even seemingly novel perspectives resemble older views in some way.

## **WHAT VERSUS HOW**

When theologians speak of Christ's atonement, we can't assume they are answering the same questions. Atonement theories generally fall into two

categories: The first kind of theory explains *what* atonement achieves. The second type explains *how* Christ achieves atonement. I will list several popular theories according to their kind.

The following primarily emphasize *what* atonement achieves:

- recapitulation theory
- Christus Victor

The following primarily emphasize *how* Christ effects atonement:

- ransom theory
- satisfaction theory
- penal substitution

It's more difficult to categorize moral influence theory, though I think it probably fits in the second group better.

*Even the questions we ask and emphasize will shape our doctrine of atonement.* This single factor sets our theology on one of various possible trajectories. Our questions and assumptions naturally lead us to use different texts and stress different metaphors. As we'll see in the coming sections, our culture and ministry contexts further influence how we explain this doctrine.

## READING THE ATONEMENT IN CONTEXT

Theology involves synthesis. Theology combines our analysis of various passages to make conclusions. As a result, readers' questions and assumptions influence our understanding of doctrines more than we might think. Our backgrounds and basic view of the world shape which doctrines we prioritize. They make us think certain texts are clear while others seem unclear. The questions of our age lead us to give too much (or too little) weight to certain passages. We might even try to force the Bible to answer our questions. We could say that theological doctrines are the conclusions we reach when we interpret the Bible using various cultural and historical lenses.

As an example, we'll use the doctrine of atonement to illustrate culture's impact on theology. The fact that culture influences theology does not at all imply that all theology is mistaken. Rather, it simply means we purposely need to diversify our perspective. We must consistently look for blind spots and critically assess common conclusions.

Adonis Vidu demonstrates the point well. He explores the influence of context on the doctrine of atonement. He says, “The history of atonement thinking could be read as an ongoing conversation with the history of thinking about justice and the law.”<sup>1</sup> During the patristic age, Vidu explains, “the interests of the gods in relation to justice are not first and foremost the preservation of the law. Laws are very much secondary to a justice understood primarily as order.”<sup>2</sup> Many people assumed “laws apply between humans, but they are not binding on God.”<sup>3</sup>

With time, views on law and justice evolved. By the medieval period, “in both law and theology, justice comes to be approximated as law. Law is now regarded as defining the framework for human and divine relationships.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, law is an expression of God’s own being. Sin demands satisfaction or punishment that is proportionate to the crime.

The Reformers sharpen the distinction between natural law and temporal, social laws. The former could not be discerned through fallen reason. The latter imperfectly reflects the revealed will of God. This perspective led to differing ways of relating law and Christ’s atoning work. For Luther, the law is merely a guide that condemns and so “curbs” crime.<sup>5</sup> Christ’s death overcomes the penalty levied against us by the law. For Calvin, the law becomes central to the mechanism of salvation itself. He not only accepts the punishment meted out by law; Christ perfectly obeys its commands. Accordingly, Vidu says, “Rather than construing law as the enemy that must be defeated, it is rather the means by which the ultimate victory is won.”<sup>6</sup>

This short overview cannot do justice to Vidu’s study. Still, it suggests just one way that context subtly shifts the way we form doctrine. To be sure, even when views on the atonement differ, they do not necessarily contradict Scripture or each other. Our culture influences and shapes our theology. One’s environment and experiences act like lenses.

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<sup>1</sup>Adonis Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice: The Cross in Historical and Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), xiv.

<sup>2</sup>Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice*, xvi.

<sup>3</sup>Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice*, 46.

<sup>4</sup>Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice*, xvi.

<sup>5</sup>Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice*, 100.

<sup>6</sup>Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice*, 120.

## HOW THEOLOGIAN'S CONTEXTUALIZE THE ATONEMENT

In what follows, we will glance back at the landscape above. Planted in each atonement theory is an agenda or purpose. Each view wants to contextualize Christ's work for its age. In other words, they want to make clear how the atonement affects their audience's life. To be sure, they also connect with many of the same needs seen around the world today.

Recapitulation theory stands in contrast to ancient Gnosticism. In antiquity, this philosophy increasingly influenced how people saw the world. Gnostics divided flesh from spirit. The former belonged to the material world, which was thought to be corrupt. Thus, they asserted that the flesh of our physical bodies is corrupt.

Early proponents of recapitulation theory counter that assumption. They affirm the inherent goodness of God's creation. Recapitulation theory challenges gnostic thinking. We should not expect God ultimately to cast aside our bodies with the physical world. In fact, the atonement aims to restore the world to its original state. The present sinful world is not its natural state.

Ransom theory utilizes "debt" language, which is pervasive in Scripture. The Bible routinely uses debt specifically to talk about atonement. In the ancient world, debt led to slavery. Slavery as a consequence of debt was a daily reality. Naturally, the average person could easily understand the import of this theory.

Christus Victor emphasizes kingship and victory. These concepts are universal throughout history and the world. Territories and kingdoms have suffered from tyranny. People long for a deliverer. Fittingly, the gospel inherently has kingdom connotations. Christ's life, death, and resurrection manifest his royal victory.

The gospel magnifies Christ's power. For this reason, Christus Victor addresses concerns found in so-called fear-power cultures. These cultures stress demons, evil spirits, ancestors, and spirits. They exist throughout the world, especially among tribal peoples in Sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia. The ancient and medieval worlds also were very sensitive to the influence of spirits. People needed to know that Christ overcomes all the world's spirits.

Anselm's satisfaction theory was influenced by the feudalism of his age. According to that system, the tenant had a duty to honor the landowner. Upholding justice entailed maintaining social harmony and order. Humans are God's tenants who owe God honor.

However, our disobedience disrupts the natural order. It dishonors God. Harmony (i.e., justice) entails restoration. How does this happen? The tenants must make compensation. God's demand for honor requires satisfaction. If we don't give God recompense, he will restore his honor himself. Without some satisfying compensation, harmony would require that God destroy humanity. Anselm's honor-shame perspective provides him with assumptions about harmony, justice, and honor. In this way, his culture influences his theory.

From this point, we begin to observe a historical transition. Previous atonement theories mainly concern the grand biblical story. They speak about God's design for the world and especially how God conquers enemies. Early theories have a more cosmic scope. The closer we get to penal substitution, theories become increasingly individualistic. They explain how Christ atones for an individual's sins.

Penal substitutionary atonement (PSA) and satisfaction theory share a common historical background. Both emerge from a medieval worldview. The Reformers insist that God requires satisfaction; yet they adjust the conditions for satisfaction. Rather than God's honor, it is God's law that needs satisfaction. According to this view, God is less a landowner than a judge. Calvin and Luther both had legal backgrounds. Not surprisingly, they naturally appeal to judicial imagery when explaining the atonement.

Anselm's view of justice concerns harmony and honor whereas PSA is based on retributive justice. This view of justice claims that God must punish every single sin without exception. Sinful people cannot compensate for their sin. Only punishment satisfies justice. Without this view of justice, the argument for PSA is substantially weakened.

What about moral influence theory? As liberalism increasingly spread throughout Christianity, people began to underscore religion's practical elements above its abstract parts. Theology became even more compartmentalized and individualized. In this way, moral influence theory is more subjective than prior perspectives. It emphasizes moral transformation. It seeks to spur concrete life change. Advocates want the atonement to have practical importance. While this goal is laudable, it forsakes objective aspects of the atonement. This theory tends to be popular with people who doubt supernatural events and who deny Jesus' divinity.

## WHAT ABOUT US?

We can see how historical and cultural factors influenced theologians of the past. But what about us? Are we more objective? To consider this question, look at three common perspectives of “justice.” One can speak of retributive justice, restorative justice, and covenantal justice. These three views are not exhaustive. While they do not inherently contradict, each potentially leads us to highlight different values or ideas.

How does one’s view of justice shape a person’s understanding of Christ’s work? Whatever our theory of atonement, we can be sure some approach to justice underlies it. For example, retributive justice underscores the necessity of God punishing wrongdoers. By contrast, covenant justice might cause readers to focus more on God’s saving faithfulness to his people. Our assumptions about the nature of justice affect our interpretation of Scripture whenever it speaks of justice. Rather than argue for one theory of justice over another, we should consider how these multiple facets of justice interrelate.

Broadly, people agree that “justice” refers to right actions or a right state of affairs. However, what is right or correct? What is right depends on circumstances and relationship. How a judge righteously treats a criminal is not the same as how he righteously treats an innocent person. In different cultures and churches, people emphasize varied aspects of justice. Even within Western philosophy, no single theory of justice exists.

## RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

Retributive justice lays stress on the punishment and correction of wrongdoing. Justice demands that every single sin receives punishment. Accordingly, God reveals his justice through punishing every sin. In this way, it has a negative connotation. This perspective focuses God’s role as judge.

Many Christians hold this view today. Its prominence in the church is in part explained by its emphasis during the Protestant Reformation. Retributive justice reflects the belief that the consequences of evil not only will *but should* catch up with a person.

Several biblical texts affirm this conception of justice. For example, in Matthew 16:27, Jesus says, “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. Job 34:11; Ps 7:15-16; 28:4; 62:12; 137:8; Jer 17:10; 50:15, 29; Mt 16:27; Rom 2:6; Gal 6:7; Rev 18:6.

Some verses merely speak about a general principle of retribution. Ecclesiastes 10:8 says, “He who digs a pit will fall into it, and whoever breaks through a wall will be bitten by a snake.”<sup>8</sup> This principle is creatively applied within a Christian context. Christ suffers although he has no sin. Conversely, God shows them mercy although sinners are the ones who do evil.

Perhaps the most cited passage supporting retributive justice comes from Leviticus 24:17-22:

Anyone who kills a human being shall be put to death. Anyone who kills an animal shall make restitution for it, life for life. Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered. One who kills an animal shall make restitution for it; but one who kills a human being shall be put to death. You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen: for I am the LORD your God.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, scholars dispute this passage’s interpretation. Some people argue that this command expresses mercy, not severity. Why? In ancient society, people received different penalties based on group identity, social status, and so on. Accordingly, this tooth-for-a-tooth principle eliminates or minimizes injustice.<sup>10</sup>

If we subscribe to this interpretation, what would it mean for our view of justice and the atonement? One could conclude that advocates of retributive justice misunderstand the point of Leviticus and so overemphasize the role of punishment. Specifically, justice would not necessarily require punishment, but rather mercy.<sup>11</sup>

## RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Restorative justice offers an alternative approach. This conception of justice has positive connotations. It emphasizes God as Creator, the one who will set the world right. Its goal is not simply the absence of evil. It also highlights the existence of goodness. Obviously, restorative justice and punishment have no contradiction.<sup>12</sup>

I will list a couple of biblical texts that typify this view of justice. First, Isaiah 45:8 exalts God’s righteousness (*šēdāqâ*, “justice”): “Shower, O heavens,

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Prov 24:12; 26:27.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Deut 19:18-21; Mt 5:38-40.

<sup>10</sup>Christopher Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Is 30:18; Zech 7:9.

<sup>12</sup>For example, in the Bible, God often rescues his people through punishing evil.

from above, / and let the skies rain down righteousness; / let the earth open, that salvation may spring up, / and let it cause righteousness to sprout up also; / I the LORD have created it.” Similarly, Psalm 89:11-14 proclaims,

The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours;  
 the world and all that is in it—you have founded them.  
 The north and the south—you created them;  
 Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name.  
 You have a mighty arm;  
 strong is your hand, high your right hand.  
 Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;  
 steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.

Each passage depicts God as the Creator who establishes righteousness in the world. Not surprisingly, this approach to justice marks the ideal reign of a king.<sup>13</sup>

### COVENANT JUSTICE

Finally, biblical writers speak of what may be called covenant justice. In essence, if people keep their covenant obligations, they are considered righteous. In modern terms, a covenant is similar to a contract or treaty. This kind of justice is relationship dependent. What is just or right depends on one’s relationship to another person. Accordingly, Nehemiah 9:8 says, “You found his heart faithful before you, and made with him a covenant to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite; and you have fulfilled your promise, for you are *righteous* [*ṣadîq*, just].”<sup>14</sup> Nehemiah reckons God as “just” because he is faithful to keep his covenant promises.

Genesis 38 offers a shocking illustration of covenant justice. The narrative first notes the death of Tamar’s husband. Genesis 38:11 says, “Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, ‘Remain a widow in your father’s house until my son Shelah grows up’—for he feared that he too would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went to live in her father’s house.” However, Judah never made Shelah marry Tamar.

Much later, Judah sees Tamar but doesn’t recognize her. He thinks Tamar is a prostitute and impregnates her. When the people accuse Tamar of immorality,

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Ps 72:1-2; 99:4; 122:5; Prov 29:4; Is 9:7; 11:3-4; 32:1; Jer 23:5.

<sup>14</sup>Scriptural emphases here and throughout this book are the author’s.

notice what Judah says. In Genesis 38:26, “Then Judah identified them and said, ‘She is more *righteous* [*ṣādīq*, just] than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.’ And he did not know her again” (ESV). Although Tamar behaved like a prostitute, Judah calls her just. Why? Even after many years, Tamar fulfills her obligation by never remarrying.

All relationships have certain expectations or conditions. Most are unspoken. Today, many people mistakenly think a righteous person is equivalent to a perfect person. Righteous people in the Bible are not perfect. God calls Noah, Abraham, and David “righteous,” but they all sin. They were righteous ultimately because they gave their allegiance to the Creator God (however imperfect their faith was).

### THREE TYPES OF JUSTICE

Each of the above views on justice have a different orientation or scope. Retributive justice focuses on punishing specific wrong actions. Restorative justice has a broader, constructive scope. Covenant justice concerns people inside a covenant. Which view is right? Depending on the context, each view contains some aspect of biblical truth. Justice cares about removing evil, establishing good, and keeping relational commitments. The biblical writers concentrate on diverse aspects in different circumstances.

When interpreting Scripture, we must not forget the maxim “Context is king.” We do not want merely to assume one kind of justice. We should avoid making false distinctions, pitting one approach to justice against another. Rather, depending on context, we want to lay stress on what the Bible emphasizes. My point here concerns emphasis, not right and wrong.

Although these three views of justice all convey some degree of truth, we tend to highlight one kind of justice according to our background and culture. Traditionally, evangelicals assume biblical justice primarily concerns punishment, that is, retributive justice. They rarely consider other views. Why? Because the stress on retributive justice is traditional. Perhaps tradition is right; perhaps not. Whatever the case, readers ought not merely assume one conception of justice over against another.

Our understanding of justice subtly influences our doctrine of the atonement. For example, if we always assume the priority of retributive justice, regardless of the biblical text, we affirm PSA yet overlook certain aspects of the cross. Likewise, an isolated stress of restorative justice can lead us to ignore the

relationship between God's wrath and sin. Our theology of atonement inevitably shapes how we present God to others. We should ask ourselves, *In passages that speak of atonement, what type of justice do we see?*

### **ATONEMENT AS CONTEMPORARY SHIBBOLETH**

In Judges 12, Jephthah gathers the men of Gilead to fight against Ephraim. Verses 5-6 say,

Then the Gileadites took the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. Whenever one of the fugitives of Ephraim said, "Let me go over," the men of Gilead would say to him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" When he said, "No," they said to him, "Then say Shibboleth," and he said, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand of the Ephraimites fell at that time.

The distinction between "shibboleth" and "sibboleth" is subtle but significant for those being asked. In effect, the test pronounced death for the average Ephraimite. In some circles, the doctrine of atonement serves as a contemporary shibboleth. This is particularly true in evangelical circles. If a person doubts the truth or primacy of a certain atonement theory, such as PSA, they bear a scarlet letter of shame in the eyes of many evangelical ministries and churches.

This trend is troubling. The recent increase in books trying to reconcile various atonement theories gives witness to this growing concern. Taking a both/and approach to the debate is helpful but limited. Even attempts to relate disparate views devolve into arguments about which theory is most "central." Meanwhile, distrust and disunity persist.

How might we rethink this debate? First, we recognize the plain truth that the Bible never constructs atonement theories in the likeness of those surveyed above. They are valuable contextualizations. They attempt to interpret and communicate biblical truth for certain contexts. Second, we should examine the explicit ways that the Bible portrays Christ's sacrificial death. After all, if we begin by comparing atonement theories, we lose at the starting line.

What happens if we bring down this theological wall of hostility? The church will have new eyes to see the significance of the cross. We will discern new ways to apply the atonement to our lives and ministry. Fresh reflection on the

atonement can open surprising opportunities to contextualize the message of salvation for cultures around the world.

### “YOU’RE A CHRISTIAN, RIGHT?”

Before his passing, John McDermott was the world’s expert in philosophical pragmatism. He knew the works of William James and John Dewey as well as—or better than—anyone in the world. McDermott had a reputation around his department at Texas A&M University. Tough. No nonsense. Sharp tongued. Astute knowledge in about everything. And he was no fan of Christianity (or so I heard).

He was one of my professors during my time at Texas A&M, where I earned a master’s degree in philosophy. I took his course as a first-year graduate student. It wasn’t long before I learned about this legendary personality. I was told he was an atheist, though I’m not sure whether that was accurate. As a young zealous Christian, I mentally lumped anyone who was anti-Christianity into the “atheist” category. I now had a mission. In McDermott’s class, I’d show him the folly of his ways and philosophy by demonstrating the superiority of a biblical perspective.

Each week, we submitted papers interacting with the assigned readings, followed by class discussions. I took these opportunities to refute the materialistic, non-Christian worldview of the authors we studied. A third of the way through the semester, McDermott had enough.

At a class break, he rasped, “Come here. Follow me.” I obliged, trailing him until we left the building. Turning, he wasted no time. “You are a Christian, right?” he asked. Now I knew why he summoned me outside. I was successful. I had shown him how well a Christian mind could engage God-ignoring philosophers. “Yes,” I said, trying not to puff out my chest. “Then shouldn’t you be humble?!” He continued, “Why don’t you first understand what you’re reading and then criticize it?”

This emotional punch in the gut left me without breath to reply. It jarred my ears open to hear his admonition. He did not berate me. Rather, he acted like a mentor, pounding into my head the literal meaning of *philosophy* (the love of wisdom).

I’ve yet to recover from that conversation outside of Heldenfels Hall. From that point, I began to listen and discover that we can gain insight from anyone,

even if they are atheists or heretics. I learned the value of taking another person's perspective.

### HUMILITY IN PERSPECTIVE TAKING

With time, I found out that humility does not mean we must skeptically give up our convictions. Nor does it mean stubbornly holding onto long-held teachings in the name of faith. Instead, humility entails the willingness to examine afresh our beliefs, even traditional ones.

Having intellectual humility means we will consider others' ideas with generosity, being quick not only to find common ground. We also want to augment arguments that make sound points yet merely need better support. After all, we should be interested in truth, not convincing others that we are right when we're not.

Crossing cultures is a never ending challenge to one's humility. While learning a second language, highly educated people are reduced to sounding like four-year-olds when shopping for vegetables. The brain tends to judge the unfamiliar as "bad" or "wrong." With a little experience and even more humility, a person will discover who really is wrong.

Instead of dubbing one cultural perspective "good" or "right" and another negative, *the truth is far more uncomfortable and ambiguous than we'd like to admit*. For missionaries, the situation is complicated by the fact that the church has long melded Christianity with Western culture. Specific historical questions and themes have shaped systematic theologies. They lead us to prioritize certain motifs and problems over others. A traditional Western lens can often narrow our perspective such that we overlook or underemphasize aspects of the Bible.

Consequently, interpreters easily become suspicious of whatever is not traditional. They can be quicker to criticize than to consider what they might learn from a fresh perspective. A half-truth is half-wrong. A 90 percent truth is 10 percent wrong. A series of ideas that are 100 percent correct can still misrepresent the truth if shared in an incoherent manner.

If we love the truth, should we be content with settling for only part of the truth? If we settle for what's merely true, we compromise the gospel since we minimize, overlook, or even deny other biblical teachings.<sup>15</sup> Are we aware of

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<sup>15</sup>For more on this point, see Wu, *One Gospel for All Nations*, 17-26.

our tendency to defend our ideas before listening with humility to contrary views? If so, what are we practically going to do? Knowing we all read the Bible through a cultural lens, should we not become more critical of our assumptions? *Admitting we have blind spots is not the same thing as actively seeking to take a fresh perspective.* We need action steps. This book is one step on that journey. And why not begin at the cross?

## CONCLUSION

The Bible presents Christ's death as a sacrifice that brings atonement. What all that statement entails remains a point of dispute. As we've seen, context plays a critical role in shaping our understanding of the atonement. This claim does not relativize biblical truth. After all, theologians have long compared the atonement to a multifaceted diamond with many sides to admire. Accordingly, we might say that various atonement theories are relative perspectives on absolute truth.

While a theory helps simplify ideas, it can also oversimplify them. Conversely, a theory can make a concept feel utterly complex and difficult to understand. We need not settle for one atonement theory over another. We need a different starting point. What if we instead discern the underlying logic of atonement? What are the common metaphors or images used to explain atonement throughout the Bible?

In the following chapters, we'll turn to the Old Testament. Without this biblical context, the atonement makes little sense. The sacrificial system provides the critical framework for interpreting Christ's work. What does it mean that Christ is a "sin offering"? How does Christ "bear our sin"? These are only a couple of questions to be answered in the coming pages.

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