

Theology of the Cross: Three "Theories"

Written by Calvin Fox

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"The Moral or Good Example Theory"

Many think of Jesus as they do of Mother Teresa. The life of Jesus, interpreted as a life demonstrating love for the poor, the marginalized and oppressed, has captured the hearts and imagination of many. His death is interpreted in that context and is understood as the natural culmination of the life they believed he lived. These Christians see the death of Jesus as the ultimate demonstration of altruistic, servant love for others- a Model to emulate. It is a "sacrifice" only in the sense that it demonstrated total commitment. He gave everything for others. This inspires and encourages us, these Christians and others say, to live and die as Jesus did. On Good Friday, such Christians remember the life they believe Jesus lived and especially mourn the terrible death he died and bemoan the sorry state of the world that would lead to that treatment of an innocent person who did no harm, but practiced unconditional love. Generally speaking, this view comes under the heading of what has been called the "Moral Influence Theory" which has appeals to self-styled liberal or "progressive" Christians, many claiming to be Evangelicals. It is a adverse reaction and response to the historic evangelical "Satisfaction Theory" [below], which it turns on its head, saying that the cross was not directed toward God, but toward people.

"The Ransom Theory" and its modern Variation

A similar, but more sophisticated view or understanding of the Cross is that Jesus identified himself with all the woes and troubles of the world, took them upon himself, carrying all the suffering of those who grieve to the point of dying for them. By doing this, his death liberated or ransomed Humanity from Death, Satan and the Powers of Darkness that had held them captive. This is a modern version of what is what is called the "Ransom Theory" according to which Jesus' death is considered to be a ransom paid to Satan to secure the release of Humanity from his control over them (allegedly given to Satan by Adam). Thus Satan unwittingly lost his control over the world (not knowing that Jesus would be resurrected and ultimately defeat Satan and Jesus would become Christus Victor. (Sounds like the story of Aslan).

"St. Anselm, the 11th century Archbishop of Canterbury argued against the ransom view, saying that Satan, being himself a rebel and outlaw, could never have a just claim against humans. The Catholic Encyclopedia calls the idea that God must pay the Devil a ransom "certainly startling, if not revolting." [Many] have pointed out that, under the ransom view, not only was God a debtor but a deceiver as well, since God only pretended to pay the debt."

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"The theory was based in part on Mark 10:45 ("For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many") and 1 Timothy 2:5-6 ("For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time"). The ransom theory was the main view of atonement through the first thousand years of Christian history." - Wikipedia. This interpretation of the Cross has been the official view in the Eastern Orthodox Church to this day.

"The Penal Substitution or Satisfaction Theory"

The Penal Substitution or "Satisfaction Theory" prevailed in the Roman Catholic Church and among the 16th Century Reformers, who found it well grounded in the New Testament (and therefore at least as old as the Ransom Theory). The idea of a Ransom paid to Satan was rejected as unscriptural. Jesus did say his death was a "ransom", but that word is interpreted to mean the act that was necessary to set sinners from their bondage to sin and redeem them from Hell and/or to reconcile sinners to God.) I believe Jesus did enter into conflict with Satan during his earthly ministry (his incarnation was the advent of the dynamic Kingdom of God into the world to do exactly that) That cosmic war is primarily what those 3 years were about, especially the miracles and exorcisms. I believe Jesus' is Christus Victor, but his victory over Satan it is more properly ascribed to the Resurrection, than the Cross (although Friday and Sunday are inseparable) and we celebrate that Victory on "Easter" (and every Sunday)- Col 1:19-20, 2:13-15; Eph 1:19-22, 2:14-17; 1 Cor 15:53-57; Rom 4:25

The Satisfaction or Penal-Substitutionary Interpretation of the Cross is clearly taught by the Apostles, e.g.-Rom 3:25 and has been a common and core Doctrine for most Conservative and Reformed Evangelicals. This is what most of us commemorate with gratitude and tears on Good Friday. My concern here is that this Doctrine is being neglected by younger Evangelicals and, worse yet, it is being replaced by the "Moral Influence Theory" discussed in the first paragraph above. For them, Good Friday is no longer very meaningful. It seems that to many people the Cross is primarily a symbol of God's love for us or, simply, of Love.

The Satisfaction or Penal-Substitutionary Interpretation of the Cross, while an Apostolic Doctrine, comes from the Old Testament. Conservative Christians today, even though they believe and say, "Jesus died for me, for my sins" do not seem to understand the meaning of those words or even the concept. I am writing to clarify the Doctrine for them. There are three basic errors in the belief many Christians have about the Cross.

In the first place, many Christians do not believe that there really is "sin" and that it deserves punishment (such primitive, arcane concepts! They would rather talk about weaknesses, short comings, poor judgment, unsocial or self-destructive behavior, bad habits, addictions and all their negative consequences- but not "sin") They believe that God, being love, would not punish

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sinners if sin-needs- punishment was actually true. There is something inhumane or immoral about the idea that God would punish. After all, God is supposed to be all about love, mercy and grace. Repeatedly, sinners are told that they have infinite value as human beings and God accepts them just as they are. All told, many who consider themselves Christians today do not see the cross as a place of punishment or the death of Jesus as penal, a penalty paid.

Many Christians who say Jesus died "for" them believe that He died "on their behalf", for their benefit. They do not believe he died "in their place" as a literal substitute for them, that they should have been on the cross but instead Jesus was there as a their substitute. The guilt of sin (Original and actual) and the punishment was theirs, but Jesus took it in their place. Though innocent, He became sin for us. This historic Reformed and Evangelical view is being replaced, often by contemporary "evangelicals" who never even heard of it.

Ephesians 1:11 In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will...

Gal 3:26 for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.

Salvation is "in Christ". Out of this union, comes everything else. Sinners to be saved are chosen to be in Christ by God from the beginning of Time. When Christ was crucified, the Elect were crucified as well, in Him.

Gal 3:27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

Baptism does not place us into Christ, but recognizes that we are. It is the token and seal of that union, but not its cause. In Christ we were crucified and died on the Cross. Many of today's "Evangelicals" do not seem to know that on the cross, Jesus was so identified with sinners that he was "them" at the moment of his death. His crucifixion was vicarious. They died in Him, there on the cross.

Romans 6:5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.

Gal 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ ... who loved me and gave himself for [hyper= on my behalf] me.

Gal 5:24 those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh

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We died on the cross. This means we were dead before Baptism. We did not die in Baptism. It was our burial. (We were not immersed in the water and drowned.) Being dead in Christ, we were "funeralized" or given the "last rites" by Baptism. Our death was recognized and commemorated in our Baptism. This is what the phrase "baptized into his death [and ours]" means.

Rom 6:3 ... all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 Therefore [meaning, because we are dead] we have been buried with him by baptism into death.

Col 2:12 when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

Sinners are able to come to Jesus in saving faith only because they first died to sin, by virtue of being in union with Him, on the cross. The cross of Jesus was their crucifixion too and was the moment when they were forgiven their guilt and sins, justified, and given the Holy Spirit. ("It is finished") Hearing this Good News, i.e.- the Gospel, awakens sinners, regenerating them, evoking faith and bringing peace and assurance with much joy. This discussion has led us into the Reformed Doctrines of Predestination, Divine Election and Irresistible Grace and Limited Atonement. These may be studied another time. For the purposes of this Essay, it is enough to say that what many of us commemorate on Good Friday is the penal, vicarious atonement that was the death of Jesus Christ which satisfied God's Justice and secured for us our salvation. It is what demonstrated to us the love of God, inasmuch as Jesus was himself God incarnate, doing for us what we could not.

Many scholars believe this Penal-Satisfaction "Theory" (Teaching, Doctrine, Theology) is very legalistic (and not really very Christian, even immoral) and is derived from the Roman legal and court system. Many Evangelical Theologians derive the Satisfaction Theory from the Biblical Theology of Redemption (the story of the Exodus from Egypt is usually the paradigm for this) - deliverance from sin (alienation) and consequent reconciliation with God. There is truth to this, but I am convinced that if we are to rightly understand Jesus' death we must begin with the Principles of Justice found in the Law of Moses. The word "penal" means "punishment" for breaking the law. Based on the Old Testament and supported by Jesus and the Apostles, The Cross or death of Jesus is a means or place of, punishment.

The Old Testament Background for understanding the Cross

I have written much about the Law of God and posted Articles on this website about its necessity for Christian living today. It is God's will for His People and reveals the Norms by which He expects us to live. It defines personal righteousness and public Justice. Biblical Justice is two-fold: Restoration and Retribution. The object is Holiness. The purpose is the Glory of God.

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The Necessity of Penalty (Punishment) for Sin

God is Holy and can not tolerate sin. Sin and sinners can not stand in His presence. Sin is breaking God's Law. That is an affront to God, an act of rebellion against Him. It is a rejection of His authority, His will, and the willful imposition of our authority and will over His. On a practical level, to sin is to violate God's holiness and the holiness He expects of His People. It violates and would destroy His Creation and the Institutions of Marriage, Family and Community. It transgresses His plans and purposes for the Nation, its Government and its Economics. This He will not tolerate. Sin is a very, very serious matter that He can not, and will not, overlook and thus the need for consequences, penalties, for transgressions of the Law. There are 100's of laws (commands) in the Torah. In this essay, I am concerned with the essential nature of the penalty for breaking the Law of God. This general principle will apply to the specific laws

The general Principle: There will be punishment for sin. It will be just, impartial and fair.

Obad. 1:5 As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head.

Jer. 50:29 Repay her according to her deeds; just as she has done, do to her

Hab. 2:8 Because you have plundered many nations, all that survive of the peoples shall plunder you

Joel. 3:4 I will turn your deeds back upon your own heads swiftly and speedily.

Exo. 21:24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,

Gen. 9:6 Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed;

Matt. 7:2 For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.

Increasingly, even Christians reject the idea that God is holy and demands holiness of His People. Under more influence of the secular world than they realize, many contemporary Christians reject the concept that God could become angry over transgression of His Law and would require Punishment for that. This is not the kind of God many Christians today believe in and this is seen in popular views of the Cross, but it is the God of the Bible!

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There are two basic Rules, : Just Recompense or Restoration and Punishment or Retribution.

First, for example, the thief must return or restore what he has taken (or its equivalent) to its original owner. In some crimes (murder, dismemberment, destruction of the property, etc) Restoration is impossible. In such cases, an appropriate substitution can be made, often monetary but sometimes the life or limb of another (eye for an eye).

Second, there must be punishment for criminal intent. In a way, this completes Restoration, as the victim then gets back the stolen item as well as normalcy or the sense of security he lost.

Recompense and Punishment, Restoration and Retribution, is God's formula for dealing with sin, the transgression of His Law, the violation of His Holiness. In our day, all of this is rejected by many. Secular Humanists reject the concept of sin as such. ("Sin" by definition requires a belief in God. There is no sin if there is no God.) Concepts of Punishment and Retribution (eye for an eye) are considered morally repugnant or at least demeaning by many in our Society, whereas Prevention and Rehabilitation are so much more humane and sophisticated.

In our Society, the consequence of a crime (defined as breaking a civil or criminal law), if not settled "out of court" (usually with monetary payment), is "doing time" and, under the guidance of Counselors, with therapeutic and educational programs leading to rehabilitation. The deterrence of crime is a matter of prevention, the goal of all kinds of counseling, educational and social programs in the community, especially with youth or "at risk" groups. But the United States has the largest percentage of its population in prison than any other Nation and the majority who are released return. Neither prevention nor rehabilitation, seems to be working very well (obviously there are exceptions). I believe the Biblical Plan would be an improvement over current practice. The Biblical approach of Restoration and Retribution would have the desired effect of Prevention and Rehabilitation. In doing this, the Law would demonstrate the love and care for people that it often is accused of not having.

Substitution in the Mosaic Law

Beside the two pillars of Restitution and Retribution, there is another very important corollary: the Principle of Substitution. It is illustrated early on with the story of Abraham and Isaac and then with Moses offering to take the punishment that God was going to lay on the Hebrews for their rebellion in the wilderness

Genesis 22:2 [God] said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." 6 Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. 7 Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" 8 Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. 9 When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then Abraham reached

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out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. 11 But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 12 He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; ..." 13 And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

Exodus 32:31 Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. 32 But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written." 33 But the Lord said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. 34 But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; see, my angel shall go in front of you. Nevertheless, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin."

It is fascinating to study all the crimes mentioned in the Law and how these principles of equitable Recompense, Restitution and Substitution were applied to each of them (and can and should be applied today) But the main point here is that they all demonstrate the Principles God shall use to deal with Humanity in the End Times. The Principles for today are based on, and illustrate, what is to come.

Of course, the most obvious parallel is of the entire system of animal sacrifices made that served as atonement for sins. The New Testament Book of Hebrews makes it especially clear that they all foreshadowed and were replaced by the Cross and the sacrifice Christ made of himself there for sinners. An excellent book on this entire subject is "The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses" by Vern Poythress, Professor of NT at Westminster Theological Seminary

Based on this background, it is easy to see what it means that the death of Jesus was for sinners, a penal, vicarious Atonement satisfying the Justice of God and demonstrating his love for a lost Humanity. This is what I commemorate on Good Friday and am thankful for every day.