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What Is the Atonement?

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P U B L I S H I N G

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whom Jesus died. Last, we will apply our atonement theology to Christian ministry, which we might describe as the *what then* of the atonement for us.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE ATONEMENT

An Essential Saving Truth

The question is frequently asked today: “What is the core of what one must believe in order to be a Christian?” As an answer, the atonement is not the *only* thing we must believe in order to be saved, but it is certainly among the necessary truths for Christian salvation.

The apostle John expressed his understanding of the essential Christian confession toward the end of his Gospel: “these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). To receive eternal life, we must believe that Jesus is the Christ (the Greek word for the Hebrew *Messiah*)—we might give the word *Savior* as an equivalent—and that he is the Son of God. Where, we may ask, is the atonement? The answer is that as soon as we unpack the confession of Jesus as our Christ, or Savior, we find ourselves at the atonement. For the questions must be asked: “How is Jesus the Christ and Savior?” and “What did the Christ do to save us?” The answers take us directly to the cross and Christ’s atoning work.

This is why when the apostle Paul set forth the most central and essential beliefs for Christians, he began with the atonement: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received.” In other words, he wanted his readers (the Christians at Corinth) to remember the most important things about Christianity. Paul then tells us what

is this doctrine “of first importance”: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3). He went on to add Jesus’ burial, resurrection, and post-resurrection proofs as essential truths “of first importance” for Christians.

It is possible for us to believe many wonderful and true Christian doctrines and yet not possess saving Christian faith. An example is the sovereignty of God. What an important and wonderful doctrine God’s sovereignty is. But the Pharisees believed in the sovereignty of God! One can believe in God’s sovereignty and not be saved. Another example is the Trinity. We cannot answer the question “who is God?” without the Trinity. Yet as has been shown by many in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, along with Roman Catholics and even some Protestants, it is possible to hold an orthodox theory of the Trinity without trusting in Christ’s death for the forgiveness of sin. The opposite is not true. For the biblical doctrine of the atonement demands the deity of Christ as the One capable of fulfilling all righteousness and affirms the sovereignty of God over the wicked deeds of men. In short, the biblical doctrine of the atonement lies at the center of all saving truth and holds together all essential Christian doctrines.

Biblical Witnesses to the Atonement’s Centrality

There are a number of biblical ways to show the centrality of Christ’s atoning death. Consider the witness of John the Baptist as he publicly identified Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Jewish religion had long centered on the sacrifices of animals as providing a cover for sin and thus an entry into God’s presence. These animal sacrifices—repeated daily because they were *not* effective (Heb. 10:1–2)—pointed forward to a true lamb of God who

would come, a sacrifice who would truly remove sin. Thus when Jesus began his public ministry, of all the things to be known about him John highlighted the atoning work Jesus came to do.

Consider also the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans, one of the New Testament's longest and most orderly presentations of Christian salvation. Romans begins with bad news: the wrath of God poured out on sin (Rom. 1:18). But its message turns to the greatest of good news: "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). We might therefore ask what has happened that turns the bad news into good news. The answer is found at the end of Romans chapter three, where Paul presents the atonement as the basis for justification through faith in Christ: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forth as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith" (Rom. 3:23–25). Christ's atoning death turns away the bad news of God's wrath and brings us to the good news of God's saving grace.

Yet another proof of the centrality of the atonement is found in the very structure of the Bible's four Gospel accounts. A "Gospel" is not merely an account of Jesus' life, but an account of Jesus that is centered on his atoning death on the cross. It might be said of all four Gospels that they are passion accounts—accounts of the atonement—with enlarged preambles telling the story of Jesus' life and ministry. (This, by the way, is one of the differences between true biblical Gospels and the spurious gospels written by early heretics and regularly trumpeted by today's media.) Just as the Gospel books are focused on the atoning death of Christ, so also the Bible's gospel message is one that is centered on the death of God's Son for our sins.