

THE ATONEMENT - RECONCILIATION WITH GOD

By Allon Maxwell

INTRODUCTION

The first purpose of the Atonement is to reconcile us with God, leading us to fulfil the first commandment, *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.* (Mark 12:29-30)

The second purpose is like the first. Our united participation in the salvation which comes to us through the death of Jesus, is also designed to reconcile us with each other. *You shall love your neighbour as yourself.* (Mark 12:31)

In the community of the redeemed there is a visible love. There is meant to be, in ALL of us, nothing less than that same quality of love which took Jesus to the cross for sinners. As Jesus has loved us, so also are we to love one another. We must learn both to live for each other, and to die for each other.

The existence of that love between us is THE TEST, given by Jesus, which decides whether we are disciples or not. (John 13:34-35)

It is therefore also THE TEST of whether we have properly understood the Atonement, whether it has achieved its purpose in us, and whether we are truly redeemed.

If we do not have that love, it matters little whether we have **the theory** correct or not. We walk in darkness still and we are blind to THE TRUTH! (1 John 2:11) If I cannot love you who I can see, then neither is it possible for me to love God who I cannot see. (1 John 4:20)

THE PATH OF RECONCILIATION

My faith in the cross has reconciled me to God. It has saved me from the penalty of my sins and changed my heart towards God. What Jesus has done for me, has given me a new vision of who God is and what God is. It has changed my attitudes and my response to the laws of God.

It has given me Eternal life!

It is not open for any negotiation between us that I might not be reconciled with God, just because you think you have a better or more detailed theory about the "legality" of how it all works.

But I will not reject you on account of your different theory! I have learned that love must concede that, even if there are some differences in your own understanding of how it worked in your case, you may also have arrived where I am.

If you also are truly reconciled with God, I dare not fail to confess that before men, just because we differ in our understanding of the detail of how it came to pass for each of us.

That is not to say that I open the door to all theories, regardless of what they are. Some theories of the Atonement are a denial of the love of God and inherently blasphemous! Some do not seem to engender the Divine love at all. Nor do they lead to obedience and holiness.

We may not ignore those other vital issues of obedience. (such as Believer's baptism!..... or the Sermon on the Mount!)

It is my conviction that those who insist on verbal technical compliance with a particular theory as the means of grace, or those who seek to hide behind "Grace" to label obedience as "legalism", or to exchange obedience for compromise, are NOT YET as reconciled as they would like to believe!!

Any theory of the Atonement which leads to tolerance of any form of permissive "grace", we must reject, not in unholy conflict, but in love.

WHERE IT STARTS

Bible teaching about salvation begins with the premise that God decrees a penalty of death for the breaking of His laws, and that those who have sinned are in need of salvation from the penalty which they have incurred.

For those who have sinned and are under condemnation, there are only two possible destinies:

- * For those who truly repent of their sins, there is pardon and remission of the penalty. ([Ezekiel 33:14](#), [Acts 3:19](#))
- * For those who wilfully persist in their sins, the death penalty will be carried out without mercy. ([Hebrews 10:26-31](#))

Of course, if there was no escape from death, and we all had to pay the penalty ourselves for our sins, that would be the end for us.

How is it possible for God to forgive us, not carry out the penalty, and yet still remain true to Himself and His law?

The answer to that question is the Good News about Jesus and his death on the cross.

A LEGAL TRANSACTION?

The New Testament tells us that Jesus fulfils the prophecy contained in the Old Testament ritual of sacrifice, in which innocent animals died to provide a graphic illustration of the awful penalty incurred by guilty sinners.

And in order to convey the message of God's love for a lost world, the Bible does use legal concepts. The message is clear that God must never be accused of ignoring His **law** that sin incurs the penalty of death.

Some of these "legal" terms are words like "covenant" and "ransom" and "redemption" and "expiation" and "justification" and "sanctification". All of them have a place in helping us to understand God's dealings with sinners.

However, although we may reverently say that the sacrificial death of Jesus is God's **legal provision**, we must not dwell on that aspect alone.

Redemption is not merely the purchase of our release from a penalty. It is also rescue from the sinful ways that incurred the penalty. ([Titus 2:14](#), [1 Peter 1:18](#)) **We are not redeemed from anything until we covenant with God to turn away from all sin.**

It is the repentant sinner's confession of his guilt, his humble and contrite heart, his acceptance, in faith, of the expiatory death of Jesus, and **THEN his baptismal covenant to turn away from sin**, which **ALL** combine to provide the legal justification for the forbearance exercised by God.

However, the subject cannot be reduced to a mere legal transaction. There are no legal rights to salvation. Left to law alone, without God's love, we are lost.

All of those "legal" things are merely illustrations which are meant to take us beyond mere legality. What we must eventually see in the Atonement is not complex legal theories, but the practical issue of the LOVE of God revealed by Jesus, which paid such an enormous RANSOM PRICE to redeem us from the penalty and practice of our sins.

In supreme love, Jesus valued us, sinners though we were, as EQUAL TO HIMSELF. He considered us worth the awful suffering of the cross, and He freely gave himself for our need.

And it is the sinner's own repentant heart's response to that LOVE, which is all important. It is that new love for God, flowing from a NEW HEART, which allows God to regard the penalty as expiated so that it does not have to be borne personally by the sinner himself.

BEYOND LEGALITY - LOVE IN ACTION

The love for God that does reconcile us to God, comes from our own personal vision of the cross. There we see Jesus reaching out to us in Divine love, taking our guilt, and our judgement, and our suffering upon Himself, and revealing the intense longing of God's heart to save us from both the penalty and continuing practice of sin.

The death of Jesus is described in brief, but awful and repulsive detail. We are forced to face the sickening truth about the cost of our sin.

Just as in the Old Testament, it was the sinner who slew the animal (and NOT God), so too was Jesus slain at the hands of sinners who represent all of us.

Certainly, it was by God's design and foreknowledge, but it was OUR sin that caused His death. Just as surely as if we had driven the nails ourselves, it was OUR wicked hands that slew Him. We made it necessary.

At this point, we are confronted with love.

NOTHING AT ALL can quench this love.... not rejection.... not reviling or mocking or false accusation.... not spitting in His face..... not plucking the beard from His face..... not the buffeting and bruising which marred his visage beyond recognition..... not placing that fearsome crown of thorns on His head..... not flogging the skin from His back..... not even nailing Him unjustly to a Roman cross.

We see Jesus accepting all that was done to Him, loving us unconditionally, without retaliation or complaint. Nothing this side of death, nothing in all creation, or all eternity, can ever make this man, or the God who is His Father, cease from loving me.

[**\(Romans 8:38-39\)**](#)

When I face the terrible cost of my sin, and my responsibility for every last moment of that terrible suffering, I recoil in horror and my heart cries out to God in contrition.

And the words of Jesus echo down the centuries still, as I hear Him intercede for ME..... "Father forgive them".

Such love compels my allegiance. Such love has broken my spirit and made my heart contrite for my sin. Jesus will not be denied. His love leaves me with no other choice than to love in return.

The cross opened my eyes to understand the meaning of God's love.

When that happened then I also began to experience its life changing power.

Love has turned my life around. Love has reconciled me to God.

Now I long to be able to love like Jesus. Love like that lives for ever! (1 Corinthians 13:8)

CONCLUSION

There are those who teach that God's anger against sin was so great that he demanded satisfaction for His offended holiness. In its worst form, God is said to have satisfied His anger and changed His feelings towards us, only after pouring out His wrath on Jesus.

However, the Atonement is NOT about providing a way to change Gods feeling towards US. Nor is it about undeserved wrath poured out on a beloved Son. Nor is it about God demanding satisfaction.

It is about God who cannot die, and Jesus who could and did die, working together in love, to undo the penalty of our failure.

AND..... it is about the love of God poured out on us TO CHANGE OUR FEELINGS TOWARDS GOD!

The Atonement is not simply a theory to be studied. It has power to change our lives.

The real objective is to change **our feelings towards God** and **towards sin**, in a way that will change our hearts, until we no longer practise the sins which incurred the penalty.

“Here is the test by which we can make sure that we know him: do we keep his commands? The man who says, “I know him”, while he disobeys his commands, is a liar and a stranger to the truth; whoever claims to be dwelling in him, binds himself to live as Christ himself lived only the man who loves his brother dwells in light”. (1 John 2:3-10 N.E.B.)