

THE NATURE OF THE ATONEMENT: HOW SHOULD ONE VIEW THE CROSS? Part-I

INTRODUCTION: THE WORD OF FAITH MOVEMENT AND THE RANSOM-TO-SATAN AND RECAPITULATION VIEWS OF CHRIST'S ATONEMENT

By Steve Sullivan

The word “atonement” in theology designates all that Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross through His suffering and death. So when one inquires about the atonement of Christ, he is asking about specific topics in theology which have several major points that must be discussed if one wants a comprehensive answer. The forthcoming articles in this series will briefly evaluate the nature of the atonement by surveying many of the views espoused by men in church history. These views not only fit the past but often surface in the present. The importance in understanding and knowing the correct view of the nature of Christ's atonement is crucial if we are to be clear on one of the major doctrines of the Christian faith. The sharper the focus of our understanding of the atonement, the better will be our proclamation of the gospel and discernment of any error concerning the atonement. Since we live in an age with a shallow understanding of doctrinal issues, it behooves us to again study the nature of the atonement.

THE RANSOM-TO-SATAN VIEW OF THE ATONEMENT

This view of the atonement is usually attributed to Origen of Alexandria as the champion of the fully-developed theory. Origen (A.D. 184-254) had several different views on the atonement and he never combined them into a synthetic system. Therefore, he left us confused as exactly what he thought was the stress of the atonement. Scripture does state that Christ's death delivered His people from the power of Satan, but Origen introduced a new idea. “Christ offered Himself as a ransom to Satan, and Satan accepted the ransom without realizing that he would not be able to retain his hold on Christ because of the latter's divine power and holiness. Satan swallowed the bait of Christ's humanity, and was caught on the hook of His divinity. Thus the souls of all men—even of those in hades—were set free from the power of Satan” (Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, p.166). This stress of the atonement disappeared for lack of biblical support. However, the Word of Faith Movement (WFM) has revived this view. Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland and other WFM leaders have expressed in their teachings a form of this view of atonement. Combine Origen's Ransom-to-Satan view with Irenaeus' Recapitulation View of the atonement and one has captured Hagin and Copeland's view of Christ's death.

THE RECAPITULATION VIEW OF THE ATONEMENT

Irenaeus of Lyons (flourished in A.D. 175-95) expressed the idea of the atonement as a satisfaction of God's justice, but the *modus operandi* by which Christ purchased the atonement was through recapitulation. In other words, “by His incarnation and human life he thus reverses the course on which Adam by his sin started humanity and thus becomes a new leaven in the life of mankind. He communicates immortality to those who are united to him by faith and effects an ethical transformation in their lives, and by his obedience compensates for the disobedience of Adam” (Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, p. 165).

Irenaeus (as well as others) rejected the Ransom-to-Satan view and adopted more of a

penal satisfaction view, but the atonement was brought about through his recapitulation view. Irenaeus was not the only one to espouse a penal satisfaction view of the atonement. Other men like Athanasius (A.D. 296-373), Cyril of Alexandria (A.D. 376-444), Gregory of Nazianzus (A.D. 330-390) and Augustine (A.D. 354-430) believed in it. However, the greatest development of the nature of the atonement was found in Anselm* (A.D. 1033-1109) and continued through the Protestant Reformation in the 1500's. "Irenaeus conceives of Christ's work in restoring to man his immortality by the infusion of the divine life and by the destruction of death. This renewal of man Christ has accomplished by reason of who he was and what he did. In this way Irenaeus unites in Christ's redeeming work the whole action of his life as the Word incarnate, and of his death as divine Redeemer" (H. D. McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ*, p. 127). It was this infusion of the divine life that the WFM has in common with the Recapitulation view of the atonement of Christ.

THE WORD OF FAITH MOVEMENT VIEW OF THE ATONEMENT

The WFM teachers contend that Jesus took upon himself a satanic nature, died physically on the cross, suffered spiritual death in hell for us, and then was reborn (or born again) in hell and rose from the grave. Therefore, when the believer is born again he becomes like Christ. Copeland has detailed his view that Christ was born again in hell:

Satan didn't know what he was getting into. He thought he had Jesus conquered. He didn't realize the whole thing was a mystery hidden in God before the world began. He didn't know God had set a trap for him.

But he soon found out. Because right in the middle of it all, when Jesus' tortured, poured out spirit was down in the bottom of the pit, suddenly something happened. Almighty God began to speak....

God's Word ripped down through the locked gate of hell and raised Jesus up, "Come sit on My right hand till I make Your enemies Your footstool!" That Word of the living God went down into that pit of destruction and charged the spirit of Jesus with resurrection power!

Suddenly His twisted, death-wracked spirit began to fill out and come back to life. He began to look like something the devil had never seen before. He was literally being reborn before the devil's very eyes ("Price of it all." *Believer's Voice of Victory*, September 1991, p. 4).

Toward the end of the same article Copeland said:

Jesus was the first man ever born from death into the life and righteousness of God. He was raised up a born-again man and He defeated Satan in the midst of hell itself....

Do you hear what I'm telling you? Jesus was born again—the firstborn from the dead the Word calls Him—and He whipped the devil in his own backyard (p. 6).

Copeland has made the parallel between Christ and the believer being born again:

* "Anselm's most influential contribution to theology was his discussion of the atonement in his *Cur Deus homo*, the ablest treatment that had yet appeared. Anselm totally rejected any thought, such as the early church had entertained, of a ransom paid to the devil. Man, by sin, has done dishonor to God. His debt is to God alone. God's nature demands 'satisfaction.' Man, who owes obedience at all times, has nothing wherewith to make good past disobedience. Yet, if satisfaction is to be made at all, it can be rendered only by one who shares human nature, who is Himself man, and yet as God has something of infinite value to offer. Such a being is the God-man. Not only is His sacrifice a satisfaction, it deserves a reward. That reward is the eternal blessedness of His brethren. Anselm's widely influential theory rests ultimately on the 'realistic' conviction that there is such an objective existence as humanity which Christ could assume." (Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, Charles Scribner's Sons (New York, 1959), pp. 139-140)

That same life that raised Jesus from the dead raised you from the dead. *Even when we were dead in sins, hath (He) quickened us (or made us alive) together with Christ* (Eph. 2:5). Jesus was born again; you were born again in Him. The same glory, the same measure of faith, was injected into your spirit when you said with your mouth, “Jesus, I receive You” (*Walking in the realm of the miraculous*, p. 78).

Before the writer engages in a refutation of the exegesis and theology of the WFM’s view of Christ’s atonement, it is important to assert that there are a multitude of verses in Scripture which clearly emphasize the adequacy and sufficiency of Jesus’ suffering physically on the cross (not spiritually after the cross in hell) for our sins to procure our salvation. In my next article I will begin a critique of the WFM’s view of Christ’s atonement.

Endnotes

1. For a fuller survey of this view see H. D. McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ*, pp. 126-30).

2. This view is explained in detail in my November 1999 article titled “Substitution.”

3. W. G. T. Shedd, quotes Dorner (*Person Christ*) on this point:

Justice, in the scheme of Irenaeus, stands between the physical attributes of infinity, omnipotence, etc., and the ethical attributes of compassion and love as a protector and watch. For this reason, God will and can accomplish no work that is spiritual in a merely physical manner; he must win over man by the manifestation of that which is spiritual,—that is, by the highest and fullest possible exhibition of his love. But love is of two kinds, active and passive; the former manifests itself by doing something to its object, the latter by suffering something for it. The highest and fullest manifestation of love would consequently include the passive form of the affection, as well as the active form,—an endurance namely, of suffering in behalf of the object of benevolence, if suffering is necessary from the nature of the case. But suffering is necessary from the nature of the case. But suffering is absolutely necessary, because now that sin and guilt have come into the world divine justice cannot be satisfied except by penal infliction. Consequently the manifestation of the love of God takes on a passive as well as active form, and vicariously bears the penalty of guilt in the place of the criminal (*Dogmatic Theology*, 2:224-25).

4. “Spiritual death means something more than separation from God. **Spiritual death also means having Satan’s nature**” (Hagin, *The Name of Jesus*, p. 31). According to Hagin, Jesus’ physical death could not remove our sin. His death must also be a spiritual death, being estranged from God in our place (Hagin, *The Name of Jesus*, pp. 29-30; Hagin, “Christ our substitute,” *The Word of Faith*, April 1980, p. 2).

5. On October 30, 1992 Copeland’s ministry faxed Watchman Fellowship four pages of comments and proof texts, titled “Jesus in Hell” which they have tried to prove their view of Christ’s death.

After quoting Hebrews 2:9 Kenneth Hagin, Sr. said, “Physical death would not remove our sins. He tasted death for every man—spiritual death.

Jesus is the first person ever to be born again. Why did His spirit need to be born again? Because it was estranged from God” (*The Name of Jesus*, pp. 29-30).

6. Some of those verses are: Romans 3:21-25; 5:10, 18; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; Galatians 3:13; Ephesians 2:11-13; Colossians 1:22; Hebrews 9:14; 10:10; 1 Peter 1:18-19; 2:24; 1 John 1:7.