

Reflections on the Cross and the Atonement—

A Compilation

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In my reading I've come across some interesting pieces that are very relevant in relation to our discussion and reflection on the cross and the atonement. Since we shall be spending much time over the next few weeks reconsidering the meaning of these vital truths, not resting content with repeating old clichés, I thought it might be helpful for you to read through these accounts beforehand.

The first section is from noted Bible commentator William Barclay, who lays out his own personal experience from the time when he was young, explaining the fundamental perspectives on the Cross.

The second is George Fifield, an Adventist minister who set out his views in a most interesting way in two books, selections from which are reproduced here.

The third section is from Philip St. Romain, from a Catholic perspective, showing once again thoughtful response to legal and judgmental theories of the Cross.

The final section is made up of assorted quotes from various authors that I've run across during my research...

William Barclay

William Barclay, *Discovering Jesus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

To put it generally, there are two views of the Cross, one objective and one subjective, or one that thinks of the Cross as doing something to God, and the other that thinks of the Cross as doing something to man.

The first view of the Cross is just this—and I suppose it is the commonest view of the Cross—that on the Cross Jesus bore the agony, the pains and the penalty that we should have borne. The idea is that we were under the condemnation of God, and God was going to eliminate us, when Jesus came to God and said, 'Let me bear it for them.' Jesus is our substitute, bearing the punishment that we should have borne.

Brought up in that view, very early, while still a boy, I began to feel there was something quite desperately wrong with it. I thought there were two things wrong. First this, that it implies or actually says that something Jesus did changed the attitude of God, that God's hand was poised to strike, his condemnation poised to obliterate, and Jesus came and begged us off as it were, by taking it upon himself. Somehow or other Jesus changed a wrathful, angry God into a gentle God. I could always understand, even then, the saying of a little girl, 'Mummy, I love Jesus but I hate God.' And I went to the New

Testament and I could / find no evidence for this at all, for the New Testament has nothing but God's love—'God so loved the world that he sent his Son.' In Jesus God proves his *love*, that while we were yet enemies Christ died for us. The whole thing is inside the love of God. I saw this; I could not help seeing it. Jesus did not change the attitude of God; Jesus shows what the attitude of God is like. And then there was something else which came to me. It was supposed to be for the sake of his justice that God punished Jesus—to satisfy God's justice someone has to take the punishment, and that someone was Jesus. It came to me while I was still young that this means that in order to satisfy his justice, God had to do the unjustest thing this world has ever seen; that in order to satisfy his holy justice he punished the only perfectly good man there ever was, his own beloved Son. I began to feel I could not believe in a God like that or trust a God who did such a thing. For a while I was out of Christianity altogether, completely.

I began to think again and I came to that thing which is always in my mind—that in Jesus we see perfectly displayed the mind of God. This is God—in these last days, in that last week—this is God from beginning to end, saying 'I love you like that; you can batter me, you can bruise me, you can forsake me, you can crown me with thorns, you can treat me with injustice, you can scourge me—I love you, nothing will stop me loving you.' And this is why, in the end, Jesus had to die—because if Jesus had not died it would have meant that at some point the love of God said, 'Thus far and no further. Stop, I can't love you any more.'

Now no one ever thought of God like that, ever. Usually we think of God as the King, the Judge, who is going to punish—no one ever thought of a God of love like that... this immortal, indestructible lover—nobody. We know the story of the teacher who was teaching the lesson of the prodigal son—'The son broke his father's heart... went away to the far country... behaved like ten kinds of fools, spent all his money... came home; the father was watching for him... the son came down the road and into the house—and what do you think the father will do to him?' Up went the hands—'well?' 'Bash him!' Well, of course, that is the natural answer; that is exactly what we would expect the father to do. But no—not God; God loves, God loves. pp. 55-57.

George E. Fifield

G. E. Fifield, *God is Love* (Chicago, Theodore Reese, 1897).

Every pagan religion has its sacrifice, and this sacrifice is derived from the true Sacrifice by which the world is to be redeemed, through a degeneracy from the true type of that sacrifice which God gave to man at the gate of the forfeited Eden. But Satan has brought it around so that the pagan sacrifice means just the opposite of the true. The meaning of the true sacrifice is this: "*God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.*" Every sacrifice truly offered was a revelation, an expression of that great sacrifice by which God was to give the pledge to all his intelligent creatures of all worlds *that he so loved them that, if need be, he would give his life to redeem them.* But the pagan sacrifice speaks of a god of wrath and anger, whose wrath must in some way be appeased, perchance by the blood of a lamb, or it may be only by the blood of a fair maid, or innocent child, or some other human victim. When he smells the freshly flowing blood, they believe his vengeance will be satisfied, and he will be propitiated.

What shall we say of the false idea of the atonement, held even by many in the popular Protestant churches of today, and expressed in a late confession of faith in these words, "Christ died to reconcile the Father unto us"? This is not the place to enter into a discussion of that theme; suffice it to say that it is the pagan idea of sacrifice applied to Christianity. God, they think, was angry; he must pour forth his wrath upon some one. If upon man, it would eternally damn him, as he deserved; but this would interfere with God's plan and purpose in creating the worlds, so this must not be. And yet God must not be cheated of his vengeance; for this reason he pours it forth upon Christ, that man may go free. So when Christ died, he was slain really by the wrath and anger of the Father.

This is paganism. The true idea of the atonement makes God and Christ equal in their love, and one in their purpose of saving humanity. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself." The life of Christ was not the price paid *to the Father* for our pardon; but that life *was the price which the Father paid* to so manifest his loving power as to bring us to that repentant attitude of mind where he could *pardon us freely*.

Thus Satan has transformed the truth of God's love into a lie, and even infused this lie into the very doctrine of the atonement. pp.33-34.

The word "atonement" means *at-one-ment*. Sin had brought misery, and misery had brought a misunderstanding of God's character. Thus men had come to hate God instead of loving him; and hating him, the one Father, men also hated man, their brother. Thus, instead of the one family and the one Father, men were separated from God and from each other, and held apart by hatred and selfishness. There must be an atonement.

An atonement can be made only by God so revealing his love, in spite of sin and sorrow, that men's hearts will be touched to tenderness; and they, being delivered from Satan's delusions, may see how fully and terribly they have misrepresented the divine One, and so done despite to this Spirit of his grace. Thus they may be led, as returning brethren, to come back to the Father's house of blissful unity.

The atonement is not to appease God's wrath, so that man dare come to him, but it is to reveal his love, so that they *will* come to him. It was not Christ reconciling God unto the world, but God in Christ reconciling the world to himself. It is nowhere said that God needed to be reconciled to us; he says, "I have not forsaken you, but you have forsaken me." And Paul says, "I beseech you in Christ's stead, Be ye reconciled to God." It was this question that needed to be answered: How can it be that God is our Father, and that he is love, when we suffer so much, and oftentimes so unjustly, and yet no voice breaks the silence, no Father's touch soothes our sorrow? The question was to be answered by God, through Christ, breaking the silence, and through him healing the sick, and raising the dead, prophetic of the time when, Satan's power being broken, all tears shall be wiped away." pp.100-1

Truly "he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us," so that we are no longer "strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God." He hath made the at-one-ment, having reconciled us to God, so that, through him, man with man and man with God shall yet be brought into blissful unity. And not only man with man and man with God, but in the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ shall all intelligent, morally accountable creatures find their rallying-point, their rest, and universal brotherhood of

being, “that in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him, in who we also have obtained an inheritance.”

How the devil’s falsehoods flee as we behold God revealed in Jesus Christ! How the estranged soul comes back to its native home, and becomes *at one* with God! pp. 102-3.

It is the goodness of God that leads us back to the Father’s house in repentance. p.105.

The death of Christ becomes significant only when taken in connection with his life of self-sacrifice, which led to and was the cause of his death. Only thus does the death have power to reveal God’s love so as to reconcile us to him... Let us then ever exalt the life and death of the Son of God as the world’s hope of salvation. It was these that made the atonement; and there is “none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” p.107.

What does the incarnation mean?—Simply this, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself; that Jesus was divine, and yet human, perfect God and perfect man, Son of God and Son of man; that with the divine arm he might grasp the throne of the Infinite, while with the human arm he encircles humanity, with all its woes and needs, with all its hungerings and heartaches, and encircles is to lift it up, to unite it with God, thus making the atonement. p.109.

“Some conscientious but timid soul may ask, “Is not this denying the vicarious atonement?” I answer, No; a thousand times no. It is only lifting and broadening and enlarging our conception of the vicarious atonement, and bringing it into harmony with what we know of God’s character, as revealed in his work and his word. Jesus is still the world’s only Saviour. Both in life and in death he suffered vicariously, bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows, — “suffering the Just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God,” that is, that he might make an atonement.

Christ’s death was not the result of an outpouring of the Father’s wrath; it was the result of the world’s violation of the Father’s law of love. p.110

George E. Fifield, *The Water of Life* (Plainfield, NJ: Recorder Press ?date)

The paganizing of Christianity in the great apostasy [sic] in the early ages of the church’s history brought in a heathen concept of the character of God and a heathen idea of sacrifice, applying it to the sacrifice on the cross. This corrupted and transformed the whole idea of atonement and of mediation...

In this view, the blood of Christ means the death of Christ, a death made necessary by the demand of the Father for satisfaction for the sin of man. Man sinning deserved death. Before God could admit him to pardon and salvation, we are told, His wrath must be appeased, or His sense of justice must be satisfied. So Christ died, shed His blood, **in the place of man**. All who accept this death by faith as for them are admitted to pardon and then, by some divine casuistry, are accounted pure and free from

sin, or let off from the damnation that was their due. Unhesitatingly, we pronounce this whole concept false, unscriptural, and unlike God.

How could God show His justice by killing the innocent for the guilty?... p.92

...when we localize the sacrifice, and therefore the action of the blood, we change the whole Bible thought of salvation by the blood of Christ into an arbitrary concept that is also heathen in its nature and origin.

If damnation is an arbitrary doom pronounced by an arbitrary God, because man transgressed an arbitrary law, and if salvation / means man's escape from that arbitrary doom, because God's wrath has been appeased by the flowing blood of a propitiatory victim, then it is clear how the blood, all at once, on Calvary, could accomplish this for the whole world.

But this is neither the damnation nor the salvation that the Bible was given to reveal. pp. 97-8.

The blood of Christ, instead of representing a death paid once for all, as a price to the Father, when Jesus died on Calvary, represents the omnipresent spiritual presence and life of the Father and Son, a means by which God, through Christ, reaches out after men, bringing them to repentance and pardon, purging, washing, and cleansing them, and then changing them into the realization of God's perfect ideal for them. p.119.

Philip St. Romain

Philip St. Romain M.S., D. Min., *The Meaning of the Crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth*. Originally published as *Jesus on the Cross--Why?* (Notre Dame, IN, USA. Ave Maria Press, 1987) <http://shalomplace.com/view/crucifixion.html>

One of my earliest recollections from parochial school days concerns the meaning of the crucifixion. It was nearing Holy Week, and Sister had been teaching us second-graders about Jesus' redemptive death. "He died for you," she told us, "so that you could live without sin and be happy with God forever." I was already feeling uneasy about the prospect of living with God forever, not quite sure that this was going to be as fun as Sister made it out to be. In addition, I was very confused about why Jesus had to die. I didn't see how he could have died for me, since he never knew me in the first place, and I hadn't done anything so wrong as to bring about his death. The whole thing left me feeling terribly guilty, like someone had done me a great favor and put me in great debt, but I hadn't asked for the favor in the first place.

Through my childhood and even later years, the theology of the crucifixion which I was taught featured such concepts as ransom, debt, expiation, atonement, sacrifice and satisfaction. The story goes--and I know you've heard it--that in the beginning, Adam and Eve walked and talked with God. Then God gave them an obedience test, which they flunked, so God sent them out of the Garden of Eden and closed the gates of heaven. God wasn't happy about this situation, however, so he formed a people, the Jews, and prepared them for the coming of a messiah. We Christians believe Jesus is that messiah. As true God and true man, Jesus was the only one who could repay the debt of Adam and

Eve. This he did by dying on the cross, becoming a ransom for us and the perfect sacrifice who bridged the gap between God and humanity.

As a young child, I found justice in this account, but also something cruel and disturbing. After all, it only seemed right that people should be punished when they did something wrong, and that this punishment should make things right again. But somehow it didn't seem right that an innocent person should be punished for the guilty, although there was certainly something admirable about that. I knew I would never volunteer to be punished for my sister's mistakes (in fact, I sometimes enjoyed watching her get her licks). It took a real hero to take somebody else's punishment, I guess. The only problem with this view was that my parents would never agree to such an arrangement. When my sister did wrong, punishing me would not help her at all. So how could God's punishing Jesus help Adam and Eve, who were dead at any rate? How could it help me, if it happened before I had done anything wrong? And what kind of God was this anyhow, wanting to punish someone--anyone, but most especially his own son--to get rid of his anger! My parents never punished me just to get rid of their anger. Was God as good as my parents?

I grew up in a church which cherished the cross as the symbol of what we were about, but I did not understand its meaning. In Lent I saw many people piously and tearfully meditating on the Way of the Cross. To me, the passion and death of Jesus seemed monstrously cruel and gruesome—nothing to get piously enthusiastic about. Not trusting my own judgment, however, I kept telling myself that one day I would understand. High school came, then college, and I kept waiting to understand. Then several friends converted to Fundamentalist communities, and they seemed to be very excited about the cross. They spoke of being “washed in the blood of the Lamb.” Gross stuff! I went to hear their preachers, and there it was all over again: Jesus dying on the cross as a ransom for my sins. Ransom? I was not even clear about what it meant to be a hostage!

Yet God's grace is such that I was never completely able to shake free of my attraction to Jesus. What I'd learned about him in my religion classes and through my own reading revealed a man who deeply inspired me. Through his eyes, I also came to see a loving Father, whose rain falls on the good and the bad alike. After coming to an adult faith commitment in my early 20s, I began to follow Jesus as my Lord of love, and to experience his risen presence in many different ways. As for my understanding of the crucifixion, I just simply accepted the fact that it was inevitable that a good and prophetic man like Jesus be killed by political and religious authorities more interested in preserving the status quo. Theologies of satisfaction and substitutionary atonement were still repulsive to me, but these were the only explanations I encountered.

I recall a particularly disturbing incident during my early days of adult faith when I was watching a televised Mass. In his homily, the priest told a story about a father who worked the controls at a railroad drawbridge. One day the father's only son, a young boy, came to play. The father warned him about playing near the machinery below, then went about his business. After a while a boat approached, so he opened the drawbridge to let it through. He then received word that a train was coming very soon and that he should close the bridge so it could pass over the stream. At that moment he looked out of his window and saw his son (his only beloved son!) playing near the control machinery

below. If he closed the bridge, he would crush his son; if he didn't close it, a train full of people would fall into the river and drown. You can guess how the story ends.

I was bewildered and infuriated! How could my beloved Jesus and his Father be mixed up in such a gruesome business? How could a Catholic priest tell such a story over television? To make matters worse, I heard the same story from the pulpit the very next week (apparently, it was making the rounds). It was then that I decided that theologies of substitutionary atonement did not answer my deepest questions about the crucifixion, although I didn't have anything to take their place.

Various authors

Many... see the traditional view of the cross as fostering a picture of God as a child abuser. God sends his only begotten Son into the meat-grinder of earthly humiliation, suffering, and execution so that his huge divine appetite for retribution may be finally satisfied. John 19:11 and Acts 2:23 clearly pin on God this violent attack on Jesus. "Against such an image of God the revolt of atheism is an act of pure religion." Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Jesus Against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 155, in Ronald F. Marshall, *Preaching Against the Cross* <http://www.elca.org/lp/againstcr.html>

No Devil, no hell. No hell, no atonement. No atonement, no preaching, no gospel. Robert Ingersoll, *Orthodoxy*, 1884.

When God had turned His smiling face from Him, and thrust His sharp knife into His heart, which forced that terrible cry from Him, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" He adores this perfection—"Thou art holy." Stephen Charnock.

Mel Gibson's recent movie *The Passion of the Christ* depicts a bloody and gruesome event in which a truly passive man allows others to beat him almost to death. We are asked to believe that it was Jesus' suffering that was the important event in his life. We are told he was willing to suffer and die for us in this brutal way in order to "propitiate" for our sins. In other words, since Jesus is seen in this theology to be God, God chooses to endure agony and death in order for God to be able to prove to us that we can be forgiven our sins. We are also led to believe that this is the way that Jesus showed us his great love... Most of the Christian doctrine that is seen as essential to Christian belief such as the death of Jesus on the cross for purposes of saving humanity from sin (the doctrine called substitutionary atonement), was never mentioned by Jesus. Amy Russell. http://www.scuu.org/Service_041104.html

Man's atonement consists in making himself as miserable as possible by praying, fasting, masochism, flagellations and other forms of torture. This sadistic delusion causes him to insist that others—under pain of punishment—be as miserable as himself, for fear that if others fail to do as he does, it will provoke the wrath of his tyrant God to a more severe chastisement. The inevitable result is that Man devotes his life, not to the essentials of living and the making of a happy home, but to the building of temples and churches where he can "lift his voice to God" in a frenzy of fanaticism, and eventually he becomes

a victim of hysteria. His time and energy are wasted to cleanse his “soul,” which he does not possess, and to save himself from a future punishment in hell which exists only in his imagination.” Joseph Lewis, *An Atheist Manifesto*, 1954.

This notion of substitutionary atonement leaves us with the irony that God’s chief concern seems to be to keep the books balanced. Over against one side of the ledger that records our sin must be another side that says the penalties have been paid. The books must be balanced. This theory, again, gives us a picture of God that looks more like a judgmental tyrant. It winds up making God responsible for Jesus’ death. God is a God who must get even (p. 141). Atonement is not something that God has done for us in the sense that God has made Jesus take our place so that the books would be balanced. Atonement is something God does within us (p. 142). “I believe that we can understand the cross only if we are willing to see that Jesus did not die to appease an angry God. Jesus did not die to satisfy some abstract penalty for sin.”(p.143). R. Kirby Godsey, *When We Talk about God, Let’s Be Honest* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1996)

It is not necessary that men should understand the philosophy of the Atonement in order to be saved by it. No doubt, thousands have been saved by it who had an erroneous conception of its true significance, in some or even many of its aspects. Certainly our comfort and assurance become stronger in proportion to the clearness of our Scriptural views about the death of our Saviour. Still, our salvation does not depend on the accuracy of intellectual conceptions; but on our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as a Saviour, who through death and resurrection has acquired the power to save unto the uttermost all that come unto God by Him, their great High Priest. Frederick B. Meyer, *Tried by Fire: Exposition of the First Epistle of Peter* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade) p. 118

The following may be interesting, but I have yet to locate a copy...

E. Heppenstall, “Subjective and Objective Aspects of the Atonement,” in *The Sanctuary and the Atonement. Biblical, Historical, and Theological Studies* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1981).