

# THE MECHANICS OF SALVATION

*Jonathan Gallagher*

I well remember the look of absolute horror on my parents' faces as they came home to find that I'd decided to find out how the clock worked. There on the kitchen table were all the wheels and cogs, the spindles and splines of their beloved clock, with one puzzled son wondering how they all went back together again. Somehow my repeated protests that I was only seeing how the thing actually worked didn't seem to help matters...

## **How things work**

Some people stay like that. They have to find out exactly how things work. They're never happier than when they can dismantle some piece of machinery, some household appliance, some electrical gadget, and find out how the darn thing really works. If they can fix it, so much the better. But like most aspects of life, this can be both virtue and vice...

The western ideas of careful, logical dissection, of scientific examination, mirror this fascination for finding out how things work. Not only is there this interest in the technology of nuts and bolts, but also the inquisitive examination of just about any other object or subject. From dissecting frog's legs to the astronomer's telescopic piercing of the universe there is the obsession with finding out how things operate.

## **Age of Reason**

So too in theology. The same drive is there, which may owe more to the Age of Reason than the Age of Belief. We want to categorize, rationalize, systematize. We want a system that explains things, a theoretical model which, like in science, accounts for what we observe and predicts results.

Above all, we want to be logical and systematic. A systematic theology that defines and analyzes so that we know how the thing works.

## **How salvation works**

All this maybe helps us understand why we want to have a theory of salvation. We are conditioned to need an explanation of how this or that operates. And we apply the same concepts to salvation. We want to take it apart to see the cogs and wheels, all the nuts and bolts, so that when we put it back together again we can say "Ah, yes. Now we can understand how it works" and feel satisfied.

But how troublesome is this systematizing of the unsystematizable! Let's take a look at some of these theories of salvation, and see how a preoccupation with the mechanics, the nuts and bolts, can lead us not to a better understanding, but to missing the point entirely! Before that though, one disclaimer: this is not to say we should not be inquisitive, not continue to ask questions or take an interest. Quite the opposite. It's what you ask that matters! For some questions are not helpful, and the answers are not useful.

## Salvation theories

So what of the answers to that very basic question “How are we saved?” Such ‘theories of the atonement’ pose questions from the outset. After all the very word atonement is a made up word, *atone*, from the combination of *at* and *one*. In other words what is being investigated is the way that God and human beings are united, or made to be *at one*. That initial meaning of *at one* is already very different to the heavy judicial and penal overtones of *atone*. That necessary aside noted, what of the “atonement” concepts?

*Ransom:* The idea of some transaction, bargain and/or payment. As with all the theories there is appeal to Scripture, in particular Christ’s words that he came to give his life a ransom for many. All well and good. But note that Christ does not define the bargaining process, what the “currency” was, or to whom (if anyone) the ransom was paid. It’s a useful image (and all concepts of the revealed mystery of how we are saved are images), but pressed too far it hinders rather than helps.

Is, for example, God paying the Devil for our souls? Or is it God demanding payment as a requirement for his offended justice? Does the sacrifice of Christ in some way “pay God off”? Bargaining and bartering for souls—images drawn from the market place rather than from the Biblical account. Some have taken such ideas even further, suggesting that the ransom was some kind of “trick” payment to the Devil; a transaction that was not honoured by God, since God did not need to keep faith with the Devil. Very obviously such concepts hardly place God in a good light.

*Penal Satisfaction:* The concept of Christ being “penalized” by placing himself under the condemnation of the law—for us. Again, this “atonement model” also has Scriptural backing, for example “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us...” (Gal. 3:13). In his life Christ “met” the requirements of the law. He also demonstrated that the law was not arbitrary, that it was not an impossible requirement. He experienced the penalty of “becoming sin” for us—death. God is proved right in all he is—just, if you prefer. Once again, a useful parable. But extended beyond Scripture, it can become a wholly mechanical concept—a ceremonial adjustment of our legal status, a form of heavenly accounting.

Is it, as some have said, that God is like some heavenly Darius, who has made a law he cannot change, and finds himself caught in a technical legal muddle that needs sorting out? Is the death of Christ just a way of “avoiding” the legal penalty imposed by God’s rigid retributive concept of justice? Legal compensation, the provision of satisfaction for offense or infraction—these are ideas drawn not primarily from Scripture but from human legal systems. Added to this is the disquieting question of what system of justice would permit the death of an innocent being to be offered in place of the guilty. Is it ethical for individual guilt to be transferred in this way? Is God to be viewed as some harsh tyrant who cares not who suffers as long as his concept of justice is appeased? It is easy to see how some concepts of satisfaction come very close to pagan appeasement of the wrath of some angry god.

*Moral Influence:* The loving self-sacrifice of God that inspires us to love him in return. This too has Scriptural support “If I be lifted up, I will draw all unto me” etc. Certainly the clear demonstration of Christ’s love on the Cross reveals the character of God. Another useful image. But once again, if the image is pushed further, it too can become ridiculous. Is the Cross “simply” God saying “see how much I love you?”? What response (in human terms) would we give to someone who demonstrates his love to us by allowing himself to be killed before us? This is folly, not love. And what of man’s present sinful state which makes impossible an unbiased assessment of God’s presentation of himself to us? Or is God to be credited with creating the response within us himself? If so, why does he not do the same for all? Or is the Cross ‘merely’ an inducement to right action within basically moral beings? Most of all, what of all the issues in the great controversy?

## **So What's the Problem?**

The problem is that our mindset makes us want to push images into theories, and to say that you can't have more than one view. We operate in an either/or frame of mind. We see the various concepts of atonement as being antithetical, incapable of being harmonized. Indeed, some of the developed theories are totally incompatible. But the Biblical images are not.

To try to understand the exact mechanics of salvation by dissection only does damage. You just end up with a lot of nuts and bolts! Ridiculous suggestions such as: God (Jesus) pays God (Father) with God's (Jesus') blood in order to satisfy the demands of God (Father). Or God (Father) punishes God (Jesus) to appease God (Father). Or God (Jesus) illustrates God's (Father's) love by engineering his (Jesus') death.

Or even the suggestion once made to me that Jesus could have died on the other side of the Universe and the result in terms of our salvation would have been the same!

## **Only theories**

We may still wish to order and systematize our thought. To help us understand the meaning of our salvation we can still construct theories. But let us always remember that they are no more than theories. The Bible does not give us a theory of the atonement. It simply describes what Jesus has done, and tells us that through him we now can be saved.

## **Transformation and Healing**

Salvation is not some adjustment of our legal status, or wrath appeasement, but a process of making us truly at one with God. Simply to remove the guilt is not enough. Salvation means transformation of nature and healing from sin. It surely is no coincidence that salvation and healing are equated by Jesus when he says (identically) to the woman who anointed his feet "Your faith has saved (*sesoken*) you; go in peace"; and to the Syrophenician woman "Your faith has healed (*sesoken*) you; go in peace". (Luke 7:50; 8:48 NIV).

## **Mechanical**

As so often is true, it is easier to say what is incorrect in atonement concepts. Many terrible things have been said of God by those who have tried to explain his salvation they appreciated so much! An emphasis on the mechanics of salvation focuses attention on the procedure, so that it becomes objective and mechanical rather than personal and individual. That was the problem with the way the Old Testament sacrificial system was observed—as a form and ceremony to be ritually undertaken, rather than looked to for meaning and understanding. Similar mistakes can be made in analyzing salvation through Christ. You may think you understand the intimate workings of salvation, but that does not mean it is therefore real to you. Just because you know how a clock works does not help you to actually tell the time! In the end it is not our analysis of the mechanics of salvation that matters, but its meaning in our own individual lives.

So let us be true to all the Biblical images, seek to understand their meaning, but most of all personally accept God's offer of rescue and healing that only he can provide.