

How does Jesus save us?

Eight images of the Atonement

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drawing on the work of Rev. Dr. Ted Peters

"The word *atonement* is one of the few theological terms whose etymological meaning can be discerned almost within the bounds of the English language alone. We break it down into three words belonging together, 'at-one-ment'... In the developing theological vocabulary the term has come to refer to the state of reconciliation between our gracious God and the estranged human race, the state of at-one-ment, accomplished through the work of the savior, Jesus Christ. What makes atonement a theological issue is the question: how is such reconciliation accomplished? The New Testament answer is: the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ results in the forgiveness of sins and the justified status of otherwise ungodly people."

Ted Peters, *God—The World's Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 212.

There is no official dogma or Christian consensus on just how atonement works. In fact, this matter has been part of the conversation of the Church since the earliest days and many opinions and understandings have co-existed through history—with certain images being more prominent in certain eras (including today). The question of "how Jesus saves" is deeply connected to how we understand what humans need saving from. These eight images of the atonement, with their corresponding assumptions relating to the problem facing humanity, represent the most common answers to these questions in Christian theology.

Image 1: Jesus, the Atoning Priest

Problem: Humans need an intermediary between us and God to make the atoning sacrifice for our sins

Solution: Jesus makes the atoning sacrifice (which is himself) on behalf of God. This is the final sacrifice for sins, and only he himself was good enough to offer it on behalf of humanity.

Image 2: Sacrificial Lamb as Atonement Symbol

Problem: A rift exists between God in God's absolute justice and humanity's impure and sinful state. Humanity needs to be purged of its impurities and cleansed from sin.

Solution: In ancient Israel, an animal would be sacrificed to obtain sacrificial blood, which was then sprinkled on a living goat, on which the sins of the people were ritually cast, and then the goat was driven into the wilderness to die. This is the origin of "scapegoat." Jesus blood sacrifice is the one final and eternal sacrifice, thus making scapegoating (and all other animal sacrifice) unnecessary.

Image 3: Jesus as Teacher of Knowledge

Problem: Humans are ignorant of God's truth

Solution: Jesus teaches True Knowledge, and through this knowledge of at-one-ment humans are united to their true self and the cosmos.

Image 4: Jesus as Moral Example and Influence

Problem: Humans, on account of sin, make poor choices and need to be enabled to engage in sacrificial love and overcome sinful behavior

Solution: Jesus gives humans knowledge of what is good as well as the strength and resolve to choose moral behavior. Jesus, through persevering through humiliation and the cross, fully embodies God's own self-sacrificial love and gives us an example to follow. Our efforts to follow result in our reconciliation to God.

Image 5: Jesus as Victorious Champion and Liberator

Problem: Humans are enslaved to the powers of sin, death, and the devil.

Solution: God, working through Christ, does battle with these powers, defeats them, and the spoils of Christ's victory accrue to our advantage. Liberation Theology extends this image to also include freeing humans from political, social, and economic oppression.

Image 6: Jesus as Our Satisfaction

Problem: The order of divine justice that governs the cosmos has been disturbed by the introduction of human sin. God, who is just, must punish someone to set this right.

Solution: Jesus, who was sinless and therefore did not deserve death (which is the punishment for sin) offers himself as a self-sacrifice. God (who is compelled to be just) rewards this action by giving the benefits to all for whom Jesus died. Feminist theologians have criticized this atonement image as "divine child abuse."

Image 7: Jesus as the "Happy Exchange"

Problem: Humans deserve death as punishment for sin

Solution: Jesus freely chooses to take on our sin, and gives us his righteousness in exchange.

Image 8: Jesus as the Final Scapegoat

Problem: Humans know we are separated from God through sin, and yet we want to justify ourselves through our own actions (including religion)

Solution: Jesus reveals our self-justifying tendency, and takes the place of the scapegoat. However, in the process he reveals that this mechanism is bankrupt (i.e. we would rather kill God than face the truth about God and ourselves). This leads to the revelation that human self-justification is doomed to fail, undermines our tendency to scapegoat others, and makes the gracious gift of divine justification visible and attractive.

Atonement and Justification

"The doctrine of justification is the result of theological reflection on the significance of the symbol of Christ as the lamb of God, who through sacrifice transfers the innocence of the lamb to us while shedding his blood in atonement for our sins. Our own deeds of justice, our own good works, do not make us just in the sight of God. Our justice rather is an alien justice, one that comes to us from outside ourselves, but one that becomes our own through an act of God's grace. Justification is the work of Christ for the cosmos, for the whole. The appropriation of this work to the individual parts—that is to the lives of particular people—is the work of the Holy Spirit...But we ought not think of the work of the Spirit or of our pursuit of the sanctified life as necessities warranted by the insufficiency of Christ's accomplishment. Our relationship with God has been reestablished fully and completely by what Christ has done." (Peters, 230-231)