

“A View of the Cross Possessing
Biblical and Spiritual Justification”

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In this paper written for Davis's course Christian Theology for Today, King's theological liberalism is apparent in his historical analysis of the development of the doctrine of atonement and in his conclusion that humanity, not God, is at the center of the process of redemption. This essay includes King's first reference to Anders Nygren's influential work Agape and Eros. Davis gave King an A and commented, "Well done."

The cross has stood out as the supreme symbol of the Christian religion for almost two thousand years. Theologians of all shades of opinions and from all ages of the Christian era have attempted to come to some view of the cross with a definite spiritual and Biblical justification in the forefront. This attempt to come to some adequate theory of atonement has not led to a unity of thought on the matter, rather it has resulted in diverse interpretations. Before turning to our main objective, that of giving a specific view of the cross possessing spiritual and Biblical justification, we might give a brief historical introduction representing the various views of the atonement.

In the history of the doctrine of the atonement it is customary to distinguish three different periods or three different types of thought. The first period, that of the early church, covered nearly a thousand years and is usually referred to as the Greek or patristic period.¹ Here it is held that Christ delivered men from sin by offering a ransom in their behalf to Satan, who was their rightful or actual Lord. This doctrine took various forms and exerted a profound influence on the theology of the early church.

Another creative period in the history of the doctrine of the atonement was that inaugurated by Anselm in the eleventh century. It assumed three main forms: the Anselmic theory of satisfaction, the penal

1. Albert C. Knudson, "A View of Atonement for the Modern World," *Crozer Quarterly* 23 (January 1946): 52: "In the history of the doctrine of the atonement it is customary to distinguish three different periods or three different types of thought. . . . The first period, that of the early church, covered a thousand years and is usually referred to as the Greek or patristic period."

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theory of the Reformers, and the governmental theory of Grotius. These three theories are by no means identical, but they represent the same general point of view insofar as they found the primary obstacle to man's redemption, not in Satan and other evil spirits, but in the nature of God or in his function as ruler.² Each of these theories represents the idea that the satisfaction was paid by Christ not to Satan but to God.

From the middle ages on until now, there has appeared by way of reaction from other systems of doctrine, the Moral Influence Theory of the work of Christ. Here the emphasis is not on the Godward but on the manward side of the atonement. According to this theory, the atoning work of Christ was a revelation of the heart of God, not intended to remove obstacles to forgiveness on God's side, of which there was no need, but designed to bring sinful men to repentance and win their love to himself. First formulated as an independent theory by Abelard in the twelfth century, it was rejected by the Church. But in modern times it was revived, and under the influence of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and others gained wide currency, becoming the dominant theory in progressive theological circles, so that it is often referred to as the modern theory of atonement.³

Turning now to our main objective, I begin with a process of elimination. First we may say that any doctrine which finds the meaning of atonement in the triumph of Christ over such cosmic powers as sin, death, and Satan is inadequate.⁴ This dualistic view is

2. Knudson, "View of Atonement," pp. 52-53: "The great creative period in the history of the doctrine of the atonement was that inaugurated by Anselm in the eleventh century. . . . It assumed three main forms: the Anselmic theory of satisfaction, the penal theory of the Reformers, and the governmental theory of Grotus. These three theories differed from each other in some important respects, but they represented the same general point of view insofar as they were forensic in character and found the primary obstacle to man's redemption, not in Satan and other evil spirits, but in the nature of God or in his function as Ruler."

3. Knudson, "View of Atonement," p. 53: "Opposed to this Latin or forensic type of theory is the moral or personal type with its emphasis not on the Godward but on the manward side of the atonement. First formulated as an independent theory by Abelard in the twelfth century, it was rejected by the church. But in modern times it was revived, and under the influence of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and others gained wide currency, becoming the dominant theory in progressive theological circles, so that it is frequently referred to as the modern theory of the atonement."

4. Knudson, "View of Atonement," p. 53: "Turning now to our main objective, that of defining a doctrine of atonement for the modern world, I begin with a process of elimination. And first no doctrine in my opinion can meet contemporary needs, which finds the meaning of the

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* A. C. Knudson, "A Doctrine of Atonement for The Modern World," The Crozer Quarterly, January, 1946.

incompatible with a thoroughgoing Christian theism.* Such a view impresses "the modern mind as mythological rather than theological."

The objection to the Latin type of theory—the Anselmic theory of satisfaction, the penal theory of the reformers, and the governmental theory of Grotius—is found in the abstract and impersonal way in which it deals with such ideas as merit, guilt and punishment; {the guilt of others and the punishment} due them are transferred to Christ and borne by him. Such views taken literally become bizarre. Merit and guilt are not concrete realities that can be detached from one person and transferred to another. Moreover, no person can morally be punished in place of another. Such ideas as ethical and penal substitution become immoral.†

† {Knudson, op. cit.}

In the next place, if Christ by his life and death paid the full penalty of sin, there is no valid ground for repentance or moral obedience as a condition of forgiveness. The debt is paid; the penalty is exacted, and there is, consequently, nothing to forgive.

Again, it may be noted that the Latin theory falls short of the fully personal and Christian conception of God as Father. It presents God as a kind of feudal Overlord, or as a stern Judge, or as a Governor of a state.⁵ Each of these minimizes the true Christian conception of God as a free personality.

Now we turn to a theory which seems to me best adapted to meet the needs of the modern world, viz., the moral or personal type. Here we move into a different realm of thought, a change from the abstract

atonement in the triumph of Christ over cosmic powers of evil such as Satan, sin, and death, to which man is subject."

5. Knudson, "View of Atonement," pp. 55–56: "One [objection] is the abstract, mechanical, and impersonal way in which it deals with the ideas of merit, guilt, and punishment. Merit is acquired by Christ and transferred to others; and the guilt of others and the punishment due them are transferred to Christ and borne by him. All this, taken literally, is fictitious. Merit and guilt are inalienable from personality. They cannot be detached from one person and transferred to another. Nor can one person morally be punished in place of another. The whole idea of ethical substitution is immoral, and so also is the idea of a penal example.

"In the next place, it is obvious that in its strictly objective and substitutionary form the forensic theory leads logically to antinomianism. If Christ by his life and death paid the full penalty of sin, there is no valid ground for requiring anything further in the way of repentance or moral obedience as a condition of forgiveness. Indeed, there is no longer any need of forgiveness at all. The debt is paid; the penalty is exacted, and there is, consequently, nothing to forgive. . . .

"Again, it may be noted that the forensic theory assumes a sub-Christian conception of Deity. It represents God as a kind of feudal Overlord, or as a stern Judge, or as a Governor of a state."

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to the empirical. The other theories of atonement have dealt in meaningless abstractions with no basis in concrete reality. Penalty has been treated in such an abstract manner that it may be transferred to an innocent person. Mechanical relations have taken the place of personal relations. But the atonement will not be understood in such abstract and speculative terms; it is from the standpoint of humanity as the growing family of God that the atonement is to be understood. As Dr. Knudson has stated, "We should approach it (the death of Christ) from the standpoint of moral and spiritual dynamics; and if we do so, we shall find in it two great sources of regenerative power: the perfect revelation of the divine love and righteousness and a profoundly moving example of absolute faithfulness to duty. It is here that we find the key to the cross. Not its Godward or Satanward but its manward side is the all-important thing."* The cross represents the eternal love of God seeking to attract men into fellowship with the divine. The chief source of the inspiring and redeeming power of the cross is the revelation of the divine love and righteousness. This theory, often spoken of as the modern theory of atonement, is actually as old as Paul. It is at this point that it receives Biblical justification. "God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). "The love of Christ constraineth us; for we thus judge that . . . he died for all, that they who live should no longer live unto themselves but unto him who for their sakes died and rose again" (II Cor. 5:14ff.).

It is this aspect of the death of Christ that alone gives it profound moral significance. Any theory of atonement which does not recognize this fact is quite inadequate. The true meaning of the atonement must be interpreted in the light of the incarnation, whose purpose and cause was, in the words of Abelard, "that he might illuminate the world by his wisdom and excite it to the love of himself . . . Our redemption, therefore, is that supreme love of Christ shown to us by his passion, which not only frees us from slavery to sin, but acquires for us true liberty of the sons of God . . . so that kindled by so great a benefit of divine grace, charity should not be afraid to endure anything for his sake."†

The spiritual justification of this view is found in the emphasis that it places on the sacrificial love of

* A. C. Knudson, The Doctrine of Redemption, p. 370.

† Quoted by H. Rashdall, The Idea of the Atonement in Christian Theology, pp. 358f.

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God. As stated above, the death of Christ is a revelation or symbol of the eternal sacrificial love of God. This is the agapa that Nygren speaks of in his Agapa and Eros. The love of God is spontaneous in contrast to all activity with a eudaemonistic motive. The divine love is purely spontaneous and unceasing in character. God does not allow his love to be determined or limited by man's worth or worthlessness. "For he maketh His sun to rise on the evil and the good and sendeth rain on the just and unjust" (Mt. 5:45). The divine love, in short, is sacrificial in its nature. This truth was symbolized, as stated above, by the death of Christ, who, because of his unique relation to God and his moral perfection, made this truth more efficacious than any other martyr. Here is the doctrine of the atonement presented in a moral, spiritual, and personal form. This seems to me the only theory of atonement adequate to meet the needs of modern culture.

Some of life is an earned reward, a commercial transaction, quid pro quo, so much for so much, but that is not the major element. The major element arrives when we feel some beauty, goodness, love, truth poured out on us by the sacrifices of others beyond our merit and deserving. It is at this point that we find the unique meaning of the cross. It is a symbol of one of the most towering facts in life, the realm of grace, the sacrificial gifts bought and paid for by one who did what we had no right to ask.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far to small;
Love so amazing so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

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