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# Introduction

The atonement is at the core of Christian identity and at the heart of Christian belief. The title of this book, *Christ Died for Our Sins*, comes from 1 Corinthians 15:3, where Paul says that the death, burial and resurrection of Christ are of ‘first importance’ for the Christian faith, and are foundational to the gospel by which we are saved. Without the atonement, Christian faith is futile.

Christians in every age need to be reminded of the central importance of the atonement, and this is especially so at the present time. The atonement is a ‘hot topic’ at the moment, much misunderstood within the Church, and much misrepresented by those outside the Church.

For example, Professor Richard Dawkins, in his book *The God Delusion*, says that ‘the atonement, the central doctrine of Christianity [is] vicious, sado-masochistic and repellent’. He caricatures the atonement as being based on a ‘punishment theory’ in which God the Father, the ‘cruel ogre of the Old Testament’ demands the execution of Jesus to placate his anger at sin.<sup>1</sup> Dawkins’ version of the atonement is a ‘straw man’, erected only to be dismissed. Dawkins is not alone in this – he is but one of a number of voices dismissing

the atonement as ‘a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful father, punishing his son for an offence he has not even committed.’<sup>2</sup> However, what they deride or dismiss bears little resemblance to the genuine Christian doctrine of the atonement.

Over the past three years, the members of the Doctrine Commission of the Anglican Church of Australia have devoted themselves to the task of preparing the essays in this volume. Our aim is to help the Church engage with the atonement. We hope that these essays will engage the heart as much as they engage the mind. For each of us, the atonement is not a dry, dead and dull doctrine, but full of life and hope and joy. (You can see something of this in our personal reflections in the final chapter). The Doctrine Commission reflects the theological diversity of our church, and while we all nuance the doctrine of the atonement in different ways, we are in full agreement that the atonement is of ‘first importance’. In the current climate of misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the atonement, we are united in our agreement on the following.

**1. The atonement is grounded in God’s love, not God’s wrath.**

The death of Jesus does not cause an ‘angry father’ to love us again. God has always loved us – indeed, it is because ‘God so loved the world that he gave only Son’ (John 3:16). As comments below and our individual essays make clear, members of the Doctrine Commission differ in the ways in which we describe the relationship between God’s love and God’s wrath, but it must be stressed that we agree that God has always loved us, and we all reject the view that God is an ogre requiring a crude propitiation, as suggested in the ‘vicious atonement’ of Dawkins and others.

**2. Father and Son (and Spirit) are united in the atonement, not pitted against each other**

Parodies of the atonement often pit the ‘angry father’ against the ‘loving Jesus’ (or the Father’s justice against the Son’s mercy), whereas in fact there is an unbroken union of Father and Son and Spirit in the atonement. The Son willingly goes to the cross in the power of the Spirit to fulfil the Father’s plan of redemption.

**3. The atonement is necessary because of humanity’s ‘sin’ problem**

The atonement is not merely an example or demonstration of divine love. The atonement was necessary in order to deal with sin. What the Bible calls ‘sin’ is our rejection of God as God and our unwillingness to enter into relationship with him. Our fundamental problem is our

need for reconciliation with God. The biblical doctrine of the atonement tells us that it was only through the life, death and resurrection of Christ that our sins could be forgiven and that we could be reconciled to God. Jesus cried out in the Garden of Gethsemane ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me’ (Matthew 26:39). Calvary demonstrated that it was *not* possible for our sin to be forgiven through another means. Jesus’ atoning death is the divine response to humanity’s alienation and all its causes, whose depth could not be addressed by any means less profound.

#### **4. The atonement is a demonstration of God’s justice, not a travesty of justice**

Some critiques of the atonement allege that it is a travesty of justice, because God has sent an innocent third party (Jesus) into the world to be a scapegoat for others. This criticism ignores the fact that Jesus is God in the flesh, and not some innocent bystander. As Paul tells us in Colossians 1:19, ‘God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things ... by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.’ God himself entered our broken world and lived a life of perfect obedience, and then dealt with our sins by absorbing and extinguishing their consequences within himself in his death and resurrection. God does not forgive our sins merely by transferring our guilt to a third party. The atonement is the demonstration of his justice (Rom 3:25), not the means of bypassing it.

#### **5. The atonement is not merely about the death of Christ**

While there could be no atonement without the death of Christ, the death of Christ alone is not sufficient. Our atonement depends upon the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. Our understanding of the atonement will be deficient unless we view the death of Christ within the wider context of his whole saving work.

#### **6. No image of the atonement is sufficient on its own**

The Bible uses a rich diversity of images, themes, narratives and metaphors to describe the saving effect of the atonement. No single image is capable of encapsulating the whole, and to limit the atonement to one such image is to distort the picture. The atonement is not either/or, but both/and. The atonement is a victory and a sacrifice and a redemption and God’s turning aside of his anger and an expiation of our sin and a substitution. Christ was our suffering servant and our high priest and our sacrifice and our ransom. The atonement brings reconciliation and

forgiveness and cleansing and freedom. Our essays examine some of the ways in which these images are complementary to each other, rather than in competition with each other.

## Atonement 101

Our essays engage with a rich set of words and concepts associated with the atonement, which have arisen from multiple biblical motifs and over twenty centuries of theological reflection. For the reader who might not be familiar with some of the theological jargon, the following overview might be helpful.

The word ‘atonement’ can be used in a range of ways, from very narrow to very broad. This book is concerned with atonement in its broadest sense – how the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus effects a reconciliation between humanity and God, by dealing with the problem of sin. Part of the reason why the doctrine of the atonement has such richness and complexity is because the Bible uses multiple images to describe sin.

Sin leads to **alienation** ... and atonement involves reconciliation

Sin is a **burden** ... and atonement involves one who ‘bore our sin’

Sin is a **contamination** ... and atonement involves cleansing

Sin is a **debt** ... and atonement involves that debt being paid or remitted

Sin is an **enslavement** ... and atonement involves liberation from slavery

Sin is a **falling short** of God’s law /righteousness ... and atonement involves justification

The Bible uses multiple images and motifs to describe how Jesus has dealt with our sin.

Redemption	Set us free by payment of a price (a ransom)
Rescue	Released us from slavery to sin
Reconciliation	Enemies made friends
Sacrifice	Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away our sin
Justification	Declared us to be ‘in the right’ with God
Sanctification	Transforming us into the righteousness of God
Expiation	Our sin is removed
Propitiation	God’s wrath is no longer directed towards us
Cleansing	The contamination of our sin is removed
Adoption	Made us members of God’s family

Throughout the history of the church, Christians have sought various ways to encapsulate these dimensions of the atonement. The following are some key explanations of the atonement.

### **Sacrifice**

Sacrifice is central to atonement in the Old Testament. Building on this sacrificial background, the New Testament declares the death of Jesus to be a single sacrifice for sins, offered to God, by Christ our high priest. Ever since, Christians in their liturgy and devotion have worshipped the Lamb of God, who has taken away the sins of the world.

### **‘Victory’ (Christus Victor) and ‘Ransom’**

In his death and resurrection, Christ won a victory that released us from our bondage to sin, death and the Devil. In the classical exposition of this, the victory was won by Christ paying a ransom (typically to the Devil). As explained by Origen, the Devil owned humanity because of our sin, but he accepted the death of Jesus in exchange, recognising him to be of greater worth. Generally in modern times, ‘ransom’ has been taken to refer to the cost to God of our forgiveness. There has been renewed interest in Christ’s cosmic victory over evil powers and structural sin.

### **‘Satisfaction’ (Anselm)**

In his book *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why did God [become] man?), Anselm argues that Jesus’ death was necessary because of the insult which our sin causes to God’s honour. Our sin leaves us guilty before God, and that sin cannot be ignored – it either requires punishment or a ‘satisfaction’ (in the sense of restitution). The abundant merit overflowing from Jesus’ death provides the satisfaction (restitution) for the dishonour of our sin. Anselm’s emphasis on the guilt from sin highlights the legal/forensic effects of the atonement.

### **Moral influence (Abelard)**

Abelard rejected Anselm’s satisfaction-based approach to the atonement, because it was based on the death of Jesus changing God’s attitude toward the sinner. For Abelard, God’s impassibility means that God does not change his attitude towards us. Rather, the necessary change must occur within us. Jesus’ death is a demonstration of the extent of God’s love for us, which causes us to realise that God is not a harsh judge but a loving father, which in turn causes us to repent from our rebellion and live in a way that pleases God. Abelard’s

theory denies that the cross had any ‘objective’ effect on the guilt of sin. It is the ‘subjective’ effect of the cross on the sinner that produces moral transformation.

### **Penal substitution atonement**

In contrast to Anselm’s approach, which characterised sin as acts which dishonour God, penal substitutionary atonement characterises sin as the transgression of God’s holy law. The just punishment of our sins, however, is taken by another. Because of his love, God propitiates (turns aside) his own wrath, because the penalty which was justly due to us was borne by God himself in the person of his Son, through Jesus’ sacrificial death on our behalf. Penal Substitutionary Atonement is defined and explored in more detail in the dialogue between Peter Adam and John Dunnill in chapter 10.

### **An overview of the essays**

The essays that follow explore various dimensions of the atonement. Each essay reflects the views of its respective author(s), and not all members of the Commission would agree with every point in every essay. Yet, notwithstanding some continuing points of disagreement, we have been encouraged to discover in how many aspects we do agree with each other. Close listening and open dialogue has helped to clarify that some of our perceived disagreements were more apparent than real.

Our collection opens with a prelude by John Dunnill that engages with Ian McEwan’s novel *Atonement*. As this novel demonstrates, our society still understands notions of sin and guilt and the need for atonement, but has no satisfactory means to deal with them. Dunnill ends with this question – ‘If, on the subject of atonement, there is a truer, yet more deeply realistic story to be told, can we find a way to tell it?’ Our collective essays are part of our attempt to tell that story.

One striking feature of atonement theology is its variety of images, including metaphors and narratives. Sometimes these are seen as contradictory, incoherent, or competitive. In Peter Adam’s chapter ‘The Atoning Saviour’, he takes us to the Bible, selects the three predominant images, and outlines their shared theological perspectives, while recognising their diversity. These shared perspectives are the core of biblical atonement theology. Adam helps us hear the voices of a wide range of Anglican and other Christian writers and theologians, shows how these images are mutually illuminating, and demonstrates how they are the theological foundation for other images of the Atonement.

The Old Testament backgrounds to the three predominant images identified by Adam – sacrifice, redemption and righteous sufferer – are explored in the



next two essays. The first, a joint paper by Glenn Davies and Michael Stead, examines the interrelationship between sacrifice and redemption. Starting with the Pentateuch, they find that the words and concepts associated with atoning sacrifices are largely independent of the words and concepts associated with redemption. However, these independent metaphors become interdependent in the Prophets, especially in Isaiah 40–66. This use of overlapping and mutually interpreting metaphors to describe the atonement continues in the New Testament, because no single image or metaphor is sufficient to encapsulate what Christ achieved for us.

The next paper, by Michael Stead, traces the development of the motif of the righteous sufferer from the Old Testament through into the New Testament. Stead argues that Jesus' declaration that 'the Christ must suffer' draws together the suffering David of the Psalms, the suffering servant of Isaiah, and the stricken shepherd-king of Zechariah 9–14. The full significance of the sufferings of Christ can only be understood in light of all three strands of the suffering tradition.

The next four essays examine how the New Testament develops the theme of the atonement.

In the first of two essays, Dorothy Lee explores Images of Atonement in the Gospels. The essay argues that, through narrative and symbol, each of the Gospels, in their own way, present Jesus' death as an act of atonement. Although atonement language is not present, the same idea is found through various images in the narrative of the Gospels. The Synoptic Gospels begin Jesus' ministry with images of the baptism and the opening of the heaven, indicating already what the cross will effect. Ransom imagery is used to speak of Jesus' saving death as an act of ultimate service for sinful, suffering humanity. The cross itself is depicted in apocalyptic terms, signifying God's triumph over evil, sin and death. In the Gospel of John, the divine glory is already revealed in the incarnation and reaches a climax, through Jesus' ministry, on the cross. Here Jesus is shown as the Lamb of God taking away the world's sin, triumphing over the powers of evil, and bringing about life through death. No single image or narrative captures the full dynamic of what the cross means for human beings and creation. Each has its own contribution to a broad understanding of what 'atonement' means.

Dorothy Lee's second essay explores images of atonement in the Epistles of John and the Book of Revelation. The Epistles have a more practical focus, but they emphasise both the incarnation and the atoning death of Jesus as foundational to Christian faith. Jesus has dealt with sin, and continues to forgive sin, through his saving death. Forgiveness enables the community to

live together in reconciled love and truth, ultimately beyond the power of sin. The Book of Revelation may seem bizarre at first, but it too has powerful and evocative imagery of the atonement. The shed blood of the Lamb who is both slaughtering and conquering expresses the reconciling purpose of Jesus' death and resurrection. Finally, at the end, the New Jerusalem is the personification of at-one-ment, the perfect union of God and human beings, nature and civilisation.

Alongside the Gospels, the Letters of Paul form the core of the New Testament and ensure that Christian thinking gives central place to the redemption, salvation and atonement won by Christ. In John Dunnill's essay on Paul's theology of the atonement, the reconciliation of humanity to God is explored through several key dynamics or transformative metaphors used by Paul. Among them are God's grace and active righteousness, God's identification with humanity in Christ, the faithfulness Christ manifests in the cross, and, most comprehensively, the cross as a sacrificial offering dealing with the totality of human sin and inaugurating a new relationship between humanity and God. Through all these Paul sets forth the shape of a 'new creation' which atonement makes possible.

The letter to the Hebrews provides the most intensive and extended study of the atonement in the New Testament, and a comprehensive Christological understanding of the Old Testament. In Peter Adam's chapter, *Christ, Eternal Priest and Sacrifice for Sin*, he outlines Hebrew's theology of atonement. He shows how Hebrews bases this theology in the revelation of God, in the Son's divinity and humanity, and on the Old Testament themes of tabernacle, high priest, sacrifice, and covenant. Peter shows the coherence of Hebrew's theology of the atonement, its revelatory power, and its fundamental significance for Christian theology, worship and spirituality.

In our discussions about the Atonement, we recognised that the most significant disagreement concerned the theology of penal substitution, that is, whether or not on the cross Christ underwent punishment for our sins in our place. We agreed that the term 'penal substitution' was unattractive, but also agreed that a debate would be a necessary part of our work. Peter Adam and John Dunnill have collaborated on a chapter which sets out two contrary views on the topic. As they interact with each other, they open up some of the important issues that lie within this debate.

The final three essays explore the understanding of the atonement in the early church, in the light of the resurrection, and in the liturgy of Thomas Cranmer.

Although 'sacrifice' is still used as a way to talk about altruistic acts, ancient sacrificial rituals were quite varied in meaning and not necessarily about either

altruism or, as often assumed, death or destruction. In his essay, Andrew McGowan explores how the early writers we know as the Church Fathers use imagery from the sacrifices of the Jerusalem Temple and from their experience of contemporary Greco-Roman religion to think about the meaning of Jesus' death, but also about the Eucharist and various other aspects of Christian life and faith. Over time they come to focus not only on the familiar idea of Jesus' death as an offering for sin (Augustine), but also as the great Passover, a sacrificial feast celebrating liberation and new life (Athanasius). These and other motifs contribute to the sense that the atonement has a 'sacrificial' character, but remind us that atonement requires a variety of images and ideas; even the 'sacrificial' ones contribute not only to expiatory understandings, but to those in which Christ is victor over sin and death.

Heather Thomson's essay looks back on the life and death of Christ from the viewpoint of the resurrection, and finds the view 'stunning'. That God raised the crucified Christ from the dead and returned him to us as our forgiveness was a judgement on human judgement, and a sign of the goodness and reconciling love of God. This in itself is atoning as it confronts us with our God-rejecting and God-denying ways and yet God's response is one of 'stunning hospitality'. The medium of the atonement is the message - grace. It is this goodness and kindness of God that leads us to repentance and to accept the forgiveness God offers. In spite of all that Jesus suffered, he invites us to meet with him at table, making himself known in the breaking of the bread.

Thomas Cranmer, the first Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury and chief drafter of both the Book of Common Prayer and the Articles of Religion, is one of the most significant contributors to the Anglican theological heritage. His understanding of the atonement, gleaned from his liturgies, the Articles and his extant theological tracts, must be taken seriously as an authentic Anglican understanding of the significance of the death of Christ. Mark Thompson's essay explores Cranmer's theology and demonstrates his commitment to the cross as a propitiatory sacrifice, motivated by God's love and mercy and satisfying his wrath and justice. Cranmer saw no contradiction between love and wrath or mercy and justice, since these wonderfully come together in the incarnate son's sacrificial death.

The impetus for these essays was our shared concern that, as a Church, the atonement seems to be 'slipping off the agenda'. Whether it is because we avoid the issue in the current climate of misunderstanding and misrepresentation, or for some other reason, it seems that other themes have come to dominate our preaching and the thought life of our church. As we do this, our sermons tend to be less and less about what Christ has done for us, and more and more

about what we must do for Christ. We are putting ourselves at risk of neglecting the gospel that saves us.

The book ends with a short personal reflection from each contributor on ‘what the atonement means to me’. These short affirmations show how atonement remains close to the heart of faith and life. We offer these essays to the church, in the hope that they might help to keep the atonement as a matter ‘of first importance’ in our thinking and in our worship.

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### Endnotes

- 1 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, London, Bantam Press, 2006, pp. 253, 250–51.
- 2 Steve Chalke, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, Grand Rapids, Mich., Zondervan, 2003, p. 182.