

What Does Jesus' Death Mean?

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In the last few weeks, I've written about Easter as a season to celebrate new life become agents of life in the midst of the death all around us. For me, that is a central aspect of what it means to be a Christian.

Other Christians, however, emphasize that the death of Jesus is the heart of the gospel. The meaning of Christianity, for them, is that Jesus died for my sins. Without Jesus, they say, humanity would be permanently alienated from God.

To be clear, Jesus' death is an important part of Christian faith. After all, we could not celebrate resurrection and new life without a death coming before it. But it strikes me that death is only the second last scene of Jesus' story. The ending, the climax of the Jesus story, is the renewal of life. For me, that is the focus of the whole story.

Today, let's deal with the penultimate scene. Throughout the history of Christian theology, the death of Jesus has to do with how human beings and God can be reconciled. The technical word for this is "atonement," which has to do with this sense of reconciliation. Over the past 2,000 years, several different theories of the atonement have been proposed. In other words, even though many Christians will loudly proclaim that "Jesus died for my sins," there have been several ways of speaking about the meaning of this event. There is no single "correct" answer.

Here are five of the most prominent theories.

One of the earliest is the Moral Influence Theory. It taught that Jesus came to bring about a positive change in humanity. His teachings, example, and actions are the basis of his ministry. He came to reform society, and he died because of the radical nature of his moral example. It's an attractive theory because it focusses on the entire life of Jesus, who reveals the depth of God's love for all of creation.

In this view, the cross is not so much a rescue mission or a way of dealing with human guilt. Rather it demonstrates the fullness of God's passion for the world. Jesus helps us recognize that our lives are enfolded in God's transcendent love. When we know how fully and powerfully God loves us, everything changes. That's the moral influence of Jesus' death. It convinces us of God's powerful and passionate love for all the world.

The second is called the Ransom Theory. It finds its roots in the teaching of Origen in the third century and begins with the presupposition that people need to be rescued from some form of oppression. Humanity is enslaved, in bondage to either sin or evil. Jesus becomes the liberator, the one who sets us free so that we might be reconciled with God.

Third is what is called the Christus Victor Theory. Jesus died to defeat the powers of evil, such as sin, death, or the devil. Gustav Aulen argued that this was the dominant theory throughout church history. He writes that the death of Christ is "first and foremost a victory over the powers which hold [humanity] in bondage."

The fourth is the Satisfaction Theory. Proposed by Anselm in the twelfth century, this theory states that Jesus' death satisfies God's demand for justice. Satisfaction in this instance means restitution or paying back a debt. Sin is an injustice which must be balanced. Since we are sinners and cannot satisfy the demand for justice, Jesus died to satisfy God.

This theory was modified during the Reformation to become the Penal Substitutionary Theory, which is the dominant theory today. This view adds a legal dimension to Anselm's theory. Jesus died to satisfy God's wrath against sin. Jesus is punished (penal) in the place of sinners (substitution) to satisfy the legal demand of God to punish sin. Because Jesus died, God

can now forgive sinners because Jesus was punished in the place of the sinner. By his death, Christ appeases an angry God in our stead.

This theory, which became dominant in the Middle Ages, once again became the dominant model in the early 20th century, particularly in evangelical churches. Christ's death is the necessary sacrifice to atone for human guilt and sin. If we can't claim that Jesus "died for my sins," then we aren't a true Christian.

This understanding was enshrined in the hearts and minds of evangelical Christians by the so-called Four Spiritual Laws. This was a popular tract written by American evangelist, Bill Bright in 1952 as part of his Campus Crusade for Christ ministry. This tract was handed out to millions of college students and became so ubiquitous that many simply thought this was the only way to be a Christian.

The fifth theory is the Scapegoat Theory. In this modern theory, Jesus dies as the scapegoat for humanity. In this view, based on the work of Rene Girard, Jesus is not so much a sacrifice which is needed to satisfy God's demand for justice. Rather, it thinks of Jesus as a victim: Jesus was killed by a violent crowd which spurs on the governing Roman authority to execute him. However, in his resurrection, Jesus is shown to be innocent as the true Son of God, and those who executed him are deemed to be guilty. Jesus becomes the scapegoat for the violence of those who wished to put him to death.

The first, second, and third theories emphasize what the death of Jesus does for human beings. Anselm and the leaders of the Reformation proposed a revolutionary view that the death of Jesus also acted on God.

Let me suggest that these theories all have something to add to our understanding of the work of reconciliation. They enrich our understanding of the work of Jesus in both his life and his death. Each on its own is only partially true.