CHAPTER 11

SALVATION AND ATONEMENT

A. The Doctrine of Salvation

There is no authoritative dogma about how Christ's work should be understood. In the New Testament and the early Church, many images were used to describe what Christ did. Tillich pointed out that the dominant Christology of any age coincides with its concept of man's basic need. In the patristic age man was obsessed with the problem of finitude and mortality. Guilt and sin were the main problems of the Reformation period. Between World War I and World War II, the main problem was the threat of meaninglessness. Since Tillich's death, the problem of freedom has become the focus of attention. Thus, theologies of liberation have arisen to meet the contemporary mood. Therefore, because men have differed from one age to the next about their most pressing problems, there has been no classic picture of what man needs to be saved from, and no standard definition of the role of the Savior.

The New Testament has no uniform interpretation of Christ's work. Rather, several metaphors are employed.

1. One of five New Testament symbols is a financial one. The setting is an ancient slave market, where slaves are auctioned

off and get new masters, or sometimes are purchased to be set free. In this metaphor, Christ is compared to someone who pays the price to liberate a slave. Finding mankind in bondage, Christ gives his life. He pays the ransom to liberate us. His giving of himself liberates man from slavery to sin. This explanation is found in Mark 10:45[1] and Galatians 3:13.

2. The second New Testament metaphor is a military one. The scene takes place on a battlefield. God and evil are at war for the possession of man. Satan succeeds in capturing us. Christ is here depicted as God's warrior, commissioned to free the captives and return them home to safety. When Jesus is condemned to death, it looks as though evil has at last won. But Christ is resurrected, and through his resurrection he triumphs over man's greatest enemy, death. Hence, Christ is the final victor. He delivers the captives from the kingdom of darkness, and brings them into the kingdom of light. Through his life of humility, obedience and service, Christ disarms the demonic "principalities and powers," reestablishing God's rightful dominion over the earth (Col. 1:13-14,[2] 2:15).

3. The third New Testament symbol is a sacrificial one; here the setting is an altar. When individuals commit offenses against God, and wish to remove their heavy burden of guilt, they bring an offering to the altar. Christ is our high priest. He serves as the mediator between sinful men and the holy God, as the Jewish high priest did at the Day of Atonement (Heb. 4:14-5:10); but Christ is more than a priest. He is also the sacrificial victim, the lamb of the Passover. He offers up his own life on the altar, to reconcile man and God. His own blood is shed to make peace between God and His people (Rom. 3:24-26; 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Tim. 2:6).

4. The fourth image is a legal one; here the setting is a courtroom. God sits at the judge's bench. Man has been accused of numerous crimes, each one of which carries a death penalty. The judge listens to the evidence, and pronounces a

verdict of guilty. Suddenly, a righteous man stands beside the accused, and offers to take the sentence upon himself. In other words, Christ takes our place and suffers for us (Rom. 5:16-17).
5. The fifth image is expressed in the language of the covenant. The scene involves a broken personal relationship, and the theme is reconciliation. Man has broken his covenant with God. We have turned our backs on Him. We act as though we no longer want to be God's friend. As Tillich says, sin leads to estrangement. The only way the covenantal ties can be restored is through an act of forgiveness on God's part. Through Christ, God and man are rejoined in covenant fellowship (Rom. 5:10-11, 11:13-15; 2 Cor. 5:17-21; Eph. 2:13-16; Col. 1:19-22[3]).

Salvation has been interpreted as redemption or reconciliation. Redemption was originally a financial word referring to an exchange of money from one form into another. Reconciliation is a preferable term, because its meaning is more personal. Reconciliation refers to the restoration of friendship; it signifies a new and higher stage in personal relationships.

Israel was called by God so that the chosen people could reconcile all men to God. Abraham was to be a light for all nations. Israel's covenant climaxed with God's sending of His own son. When he was rejected, this did not signify God's final defeat. At the cross, God continued His work of reconciliation, and in the resurrection God put His stamp of approval on all that Jesus had taught and done. As the Fourth Gospel says, by being lifted up on the cross, Jesus was able to lift all men closer to God.

B. The Doctrine of Atonement

1. The Biblical Doctrine of the Atonement

The doctrine of salvation is a very broad topic. Part of it,

the doctrine of atonement, concentrates on the significance of Jesus' death on the cross in relation to the forgiveness of our sins. Atonement literally means at-one-ment: the union or reunion of God and His creation. In the Christian view, to atone signifies reconciling two disputing parties. God and sinful man are brought together through Jesus Christ. To make atonement is also to take action to right a wrong. The New Testament contains a variety of metaphors portraying the atonement.

The New Testament stresses God's initiative as a loving Father seeking reconciliation with His lost children. God is like the good shepherd who leaves his flock to bring back one lost lamb. Men do not take the initiative to reunite themselves to God. Rather, God is the primary causative agency in the act of atonement.

Belief in the divine initiative led to a debate between Calvinists and others. According to the Calvinists, God's decision to redeem man took place from the very beginning of creation. But for their critics, God acted as a result of man's Fall. Was the atoning work of Christ planned in the mind of God from all eternity, or did He decide to save men after the Fall? These questions were first raised in the Middle Ages by Thomists and Scotists.[4] Those who believe that God decided upon redemption prior to the Fall are called supralapsarians, and those who claim that God decided the atonement after the Fall are known as infralapsarians.

Another difficulty concerns the divine wrath. Theologians have long debated the New Testament idea of God's wrath. Is God personally upset by our sinning; does He turn away from us? Or is wrath a more impersonal factor? Do we suffer and are we punished simply because we run up against the immoral social structure of the universe? In this case we feel cursed because we live in a sin-filled world, and are subjected to its defects. Surely God does not intend for us to feel

condemned. If we feel bound or imprisoned, this is a consequence of man's sinful condition rather than the intent of God.

On the other hand, there are serious defects in any impersonal understanding of the barrier between men and God. God is always personal in His relationship to men. In that case, the divine wrath must be at least somewhat personal. Through His wrath, God judges us and sets things right. His wrath is a reminder of our responsibilities and His sovereign righteousess. God is like a good parent who will not let us get away with wrongdoing because evil is not to our best advantage. God always acts for our good even in His wrath. At the same time He does not require strict retribution; God does not demand an eye for an eye. He does not punish us for the sake of punishment alone. We should never put the divine justice above the divine love.

In Paul's letters, redemption means deliverance from four different types of human bondage: 1) man is freed from God's wrath; 2) man is liberated from the curse of sin; 3) he is freed from subjection to the Law; and 4) he is no longer subject to death (1 Cor. 15:55-57). Through Christ's saving work on the cross, we have become adopted children of God. But God's redemptive work is not complete until the whole universe is transformed.

Since New Testament times, several theories of Christ's atoning work have been developed, based on the scriptural images: 1. According to the penal theory, Christ died for our sins, meaning he died in place of us and on our behalf. Since sin carries with it a penalty, Christ took upon himself all man's guilt, and paid for our sins by his death on the cross. Just as the scapegoat was believed to carry on its back the sins of Israel in Old Testament times, so Christ carried all our sins on his back. He was sentenced, tortured and executed in place of us. This suffering and death of a sinless man was necessary for God's justice to be upheld. Christ was therefore the propi-

tiation or expiation for the original and accumulated sins of all mankind.

Even though this theory has Pauline authority, it has often been criticized. It is difficult to believe that God punished Christ for our sins. The legal analogy seems woefully inadequate; no human judge would ever agree to the transferral of a criminal's punishment to someone else—especially to a completely guiltless person. Also, how can someone else be punished for our guilt? That idea is hard to explain. Moreover, the penal theory contrasts the self-sacrificing Son and the stern judge-like Father. Actually, God does not order His Son's death to punish infractions of His law; God suffers with Christ on the cross.

2. Christ's redemptive work is also described as mediation in the New Testament. Christ stands between God and man; hence he is often called the God-man. In the Old Testament the prophets and priests served as divine mediators: the prophet as a preacher and teacher of God's revelation, and the priest as an intercessor before God on behalf of sinners. These two roles are combined in the New Testament concept of Christ; thus 1 Timothy describes Christ as the mediator (2:5).

3. Christ is the agent of divine revelation, a living revelation of the Godhead. He not only gives a message from God as the prophets did; he is the incarnation of the divine Word, the revelator, life-bringer and light-bearer, as the Fourth Gospel declares (John 1:14 and 1 John 1:2).

4. Finally, Christ is described in the New Testament as the victor over Satan. Man is in bondage to the evil one. He lives in a world dominated by demonic principalities and powers. Therefore, Christ's mission was to invade, do battle with, and crush the realm of Satan (Col. 2:15[5] Heb. 2:14-15, 1 John 3:8).

2. Atonement Doctrine in History

According to Gustaf Aulen, the oldest Christian view of

the atonement taught that Christ achieved a victory over Satan and liberated mankind from bondage to sin. In the resurrection Christ triumphed over death, and thereby inaugurated the messianic age.[6]

According to Mark 10:45, Jesus liberated man by offering himself as a ransom. But the New Testament is not clear as to the recipient of the ransom. Was it paid to God, who was punishing man for Adam's rebellion? Or was it paid to Satan, who held man in captivity? Origen was the first to say that Christ's ransom was paid to the devil.

Irenaeus described Christ as the incarnate Logos. His saving work is twofold. As the embodiment of divine wisdom, Christ comes to men with a saving truth, and illustrates that truth through his life. Then as the God-man, Christ is able to raise man from a human level to the divine. Irenaeus' novel contribution to Christian thought was the idea of recapitulation. Christ was the new Adam; his life recapitulated the history of the entire human race. His work was to complete God's original plan for Adam. Christ became what we are, in order that we might become like him.

Athanasius stressed that Christ's life enabled man to be deified; God became man in order that man might become God. Gregory of Nyssa revised the ransom theory somewhat. He said that Christ's humanity was bait to capture the devil; when Satan seized Christ's human nature, he became hooked on Christ's divinity. Thus God trapped and imprisoned the devil. Peter Lombard, an influential medieval theologian, described Christ as a mousetrap baited with the human blood of Jesus. This emphasis on Christ's victory over Satan, or his entrapment of the devil, reappeared during the Reformation. Yet many have been dissatisfied with such a crude explanation. For one thing, there is a rather low level of morality in the notion that God wins by means of tricking His adversary. Secondly, the victory of God or Christ over Satan seems to be

accomplished over the head of mankind. But man is not simply a pawn, and the victory over evil can hardly take place without man's cooperation.

A rival view of the atonement was worked out in the Western Church; it is often called the Latin theory. According to Anselm, the major proponent of this view, sin is an insult to God's honor. Since God is our Lord, we have pledged our lives to His service, as feudal dukes pledged loyalty to their king. Our sinning represents a betrayal of our solemn oath. Hence, in God's eyes, we are traitors and outlaws. To reconcile man to God, it becomes necessary to satisfy God's outraged sense of honor. Christ's death on the cross satisfies God's justice. Here Christ is not the victor but the victim. He appeases God's wrath. He humbles himself even unto death, so that God can forgive man's outrageous behavior. Guilty man can be restored to divine favor, because Christ paid the price for men's willful rebellion against God.

The Latin view was fully developed in Anselm's important treatise *Cur Deus Homo?* (*Why God Became Man*). Yet the main outlines of the theory go back to a much earlier period; Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine suggest such a view.

But if God justly crushes man's rebellion, He would have to destroy humanity. As for man, there is no way he can win back God's favor. There is no possible means for at-one-ment to come from a human source. Only God could restore the broken pact. Hence, the God-man is needed.

By obeying God throughout his life, Christ fulfilled the original conditions laid down for man. Then, by going beyond this condition, and freely sacrificing his life for others, Christ stored up a treasury of extra merit. This treasure store can be used to atone for the sins of those he wishes to save. According to Anselm, Christ's perfect obedience to God's will and his voluntary death on the cross satisfy God's justice and mercy.

Protestant theologians developed a slightly different penal

theory. According to Jonathan Edwards and Charles Hodge, for example, Christ suffers for our sins. This means he satisfied God's justice by accepting all the punishment man deserves for his sinfulness. Even though the penal theory has been considered part of Protestant orthodoxy, several serious objections have been leveled against it: 1) it is too legalistic; 2) no one else can bear our guilt; and 3) the penal theory ignores God's love.

A rival view, originally expressed by Peter Abelard (1079-1143) became very popular in the modern period. This was the subjective or moral influence doctrine of the atonement. In America the 19th century theologian Horace Bushnell expounded a variant of this idea in his book *God in Christ*, which was widely accepted by Protestant liberals.[7] A more recent exponent of the same theory was the British theologian Hastings Rashdall in his book, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology*.[8]

According to Bushnell and Rashdall, Christ's death on the cross illustrates the redemptive power of sacrificial love. Because Jesus loved us so much that he was willing to die for us, his act inspires love on our part; his love enkindles love in us. Hence, Christ serves as an example. He shows us the way to live as God's sons and daughters. Since his whole life exemplifies the suffering love of God, we are changed by him. His love unites us once again to God and our neighbors.

The merit of Bushnell's theory is that it stresses the centrality of love in Christ's life; it also locates the ground of redemption in the human heart. We have to be inwardly changed in order to be redeemed. Atonement must be a subjective act, or it is not real.

Nevertheless, the moral influence theory also has defects. Isn't it too optimistic about sin? Doesn't it reduce Christ's atoning deed to a merely symbolic act, rather than an objective removal of the real obstacle between God and sinners?

To summarize the differences among the various interpre-

tations of Christ's reconciling work: According to the classic theory, man's predicament is derived from his bondage to Satan. In the satisfaction and penal[9] theories, the basic problem is man's alienation from God. For the Protestant liberals, men are not captive to Satan, nor subject to divine wrath —our trouble is subjective, and all we need to do is live according to the law of love.

What took place on the cross? According to Aulen, Christ liberates us from the power of Satan. In the opinion of the orthodox Christians, Christ removes the barrier between ourselves and God. For liberals, the cross illustrates how much God loves us.

The usual theories of the atonement stress different aspects of God's nature. Aulen's Christus Victor group stress God's power to defeat evil. The satisfaction and penal views emphasize divine justice, and the moral influence idea concentrates on divine love. Thus, all these views contain truth, but no one of them on its own is really an adequate explanation.

As we have examined the different ideas in the New Testament about the atonement and their further elaboration by various theologians in history, no one theory appears to be authoritative, convincing or appealing. We must get to the root of the problem. What was the original purpose of man's creation? What was the divine plan for Adam and Eve? In creating the first human couple in His image, God wanted them to grow and mature in understanding His love and will for them. Then God would have blessed them in marriage and as divinely ordained parents of mankind, they would exercise dominion over the rest of creation as His representatives.

Through their disobedience to God's command and their immature, self-centered misdirected love—instigated by the archangel—Adam and Eve completely frustrated God's plan. Thus, they separated themselves from God, became slaves of Satan and were subject to the curse of sin. As a result, they

crushed God's loving heart and aroused His wrath. Instead of giving vent to His anger, God patiently and painfully worked with Adam's descendants, helping them pay indemnity to repair their damaged state so that they might be restored to full communion with Him.

To consummate this process of indemnity and restoration, God sent His Messiah. As Irenaeus realized, the new Adam recapitulates the whole history of sinful mankind, indemnifying and restoring the unfinished work of all the central figures chosen by God. Restoration requires the payment of indemnity, and indemnification requires the subjugation of Satan at every stage.

When the Messiah fulfills this mission on an individual level, he must then find an Eve figure and form a God-centered family. By producing their own children as well as spiritual children (and by blessing them in marriage), the new Adam and new Eve will become the True Parents of a restored mankind which is the basic foundation of God's kingdom on earth. When this is accomplished, then the reunion of God and man will take place, which would be atonement in its true sense.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 11

1 "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give up his life as a ransom for many."

2 "He rescued us from the domain of darkness and brought us away into the kingdom of his dear Son, in whom our release is secured and our sins forgiven."

3 "For in him the complete being of God, by God's own choice, came to dwell. Through him God chose to reconcile the whole universe to himself, making peace through the shedding of his blood upon the cross—to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, through him alone. Formerly you were yourselves estranged from God; you

were his enemies in heart and mind, and your deeds were evil. But now by Christ's death in his body of flesh and blood God has reconciled you to himself, so that he may present you before himself as dedicated men, without blemish and innocent in his sight."

4 Thomists were followers of Thomas Aquinas; and Scotists were followers of Duns Scotus, a Franciscan theologian.

5 "On that cross he discarded the cosmic powers and authorities like a garment; he made a public spectacle of them and led them as captives in his triumphal procession."

6 Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1969), p. 4.

7 Horace Bushnell, *God in Christ* (Hartford: Brown and Parsons, 1849)

8 Hastings Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1925)

9 These two theories are very similar. Anselm says Christ's suffering satisfied God's honor. The Protestant penal theory says Christ was punished for man's sins. They differ, however, in approach. The satisfaction theory is primarily focused on God, whereas the penal theory concentrates on the need for man to pay for his sins.