

Doctrine

Christian Principles & Teachings

Session 1: Theories of the Atonement
John Elliott Lein — March 17, 2018

What is “Doctrine”?

Doctrine is a *collection* of teachings or instructions used in a system of belief or tradition. It is related to the word “doctor” from the obsolete meaning: “a teacher; one skilled in a profession or a branch of knowledge; a learned man.”

A true doctrine should be healing—if it causes harm, it is untrue! They should be *doctors for our soul*.

Examples of Christian Doctrines

- The Nicene Creed (Universal)
- The 39 Articles (Anglican)
- The Westminster Confession (Presbyterian)

What about *Anglican* Doctrine?

In spite of the continued existence of the 39 Articles in the BCP (under “Historical Documents”), we are not a *Confessional* Tradition; we are not united in common *belief*.

The Anglican model is *lex orandi, lex credendi*: “the law of what is to be prayed is the law of what is to be believed.” We are united by *common prayer*, not by *common doctrine*. Yet knowing and discussing beliefs is still helpful, so...

Atonement

The Common Understanding

Atonement (also **atoning**, to **atone**):

- person taking action to correct previous wrongdoing
- closely associated with forgiveness, reconciliation, sorrow, remorse, repentance, reparation, and guilt
- can be seen as necessary step on path to redemption

“In the legal systems, the concept of atonement plays an important role with respect to criminal justice, where it is considered one of the primary goals of criminal rehabilitation.”

Yom Kippur: The Day of Atonement (Judaism)

“...the most solemn day in the Jewish calendar...the day revolves around the theme of communal repentance for sins committed during the past year, in order that both the community and the individual be inscribed in the Book of Life for the coming year.”

During the Temple period (~950 BCE to 70 CE) many rituals were performed, including the selection of two goats; one “for the Lord” and the other “for Azazel” (a demon of the wilderness). The first was sacrificed, the second bore the burden of the community’s sins and was “sent out into the wilderness” (ie, pushed off a cliff so it wouldn’t come back).

Christian Atonement

Without the Temple, Jews and Christians developed theology that left physical sacrifices behind. Christians say that our atonement was done once for all by Jesus the Christ, and no more rituals are further required. The only thing we disagree about is: *how did it work?*

Theories of the Atonement

At-one-ment means being “at one,” in harmony. We all experience life as separated from others, from unitive harmony, from the divine. How does is that rupture repaired?

Thinking it through:

- What separates us from God?
- What must change for this separation to be erased?
- What action is required for this change?

Classic Paradigms

- **Ransom:** inherited sin put humanity in debt to Satan, death, or God, and Christ paid it on our behalf.
- **Moral Influence/Exemplar:** Jesus’s entire life and death are our model for transformation.
- **Christus Victor:** Jesus defeated the powers of evil (sin, death, Satan) that held humanity in captivity.
- **Recapitulation:** Jesus as the second Adam rebirthed creation as it was meant to be.

Western Development

- **Satisfaction:** Medieval archbishop Anselm of Canterbury (1100) said God’s infinite honor was offended and could only be repaid by infinite sacrifice.
- **Penal Substitution:** Swiss Lawyer Calvin (1550) said sin breaks God’s law and only a perfect substitute could bear the full punishment for satisfaction.

The Last Scapegoat

Rene Girard (20th century) proposed that human scape-goating is a natural reaction to quell violence, yet it never permanently works. He saw Jesus as becoming the perfect victim, breaking the logic of the system.

Different Focus in Atonement Theories

- **The Incarnation:** Incarnational, Recapitulation
- **Life & Teaching:** Moral Exemplar/Influence, Healing Servant, Solidarity
- **Crucifixion:** Satisfaction, Substitution, Scapegoat
- **Resurrection:** Ransom, Christus Victor

Eastern Orthodox *Theosis*

The Eastern churches, from at least the 4th century on, teach primarily that the Christian life is meant to be a transformative process whose aim is likeness to or union with God: “divinization,” becoming divine.

Rather than an academic theory to be discussed, it is a mystical path to be followed.

“He became man that we might become god.” — *Athanasius*

“Deification is the attaining of likeness to God and union with him so far as is possible.” — *Pseudo-Dionysius*

“A sure warrant for looking forward with hope to deification of human nature is provided by the Incarnation of God, which makes man God to the same degree as God Himself became man...Let us become the image of the one whole God, bearing nothing earthly in ourselves, so that we may consort with God and become gods, receiving from God our existence as gods. For it is clear that He Who became man without sin will divinize human nature without changing it into the Divine Nature, and will raise it up for His Own sake to the same degree as He lowered Himself for man's sake.”

— *Maximus the Confessor (600)*

While some compare this to *sanctification* in the Western tradition, it is significantly different. There are three stages to theosis overall in Orthodox teaching:

- **Purification:** The purgative way or *katharsis*.
- **Illumination:** the illuminative way, the vision of God, or *theoria*.
- **Sainthood:** the unitive way, or *theosis*.