

# Oliver Crisp on *Approaching the Atonement*

The penetrating style and exceedingly capable analytic skills of [Oliver D. Crisp](#) has given us an outstanding work on atonement. Previously, Crisp co-edited a collection of papers presented at the third annual [Los Angeles Theology Conference](#) under the title, [Locating the Atonement](#). In his newest, Crisp lays out atonement models typically on offer and summarizes their strengths and shortcomings. He argues that those models of atonement handed down through the ages fail to offer a complete picture that adequately accounts for a mechanism of atonement. The final chapter, “Participation and Atonement” teases out his own model, which he calls “the union account of the atonement.”

Readers will benefit from having a general overview of various atonement accounts as this will help grasp the content quicker. But *Approaching the Atonement* can also serve as a good introduction to the atonement. A Glossary of Terms is provided and I recommend readers review these early on.

I won't speak to every chapter, but will highlight some things that I found intriguing and, to my mind, satisfying.



Along with showing the inadequacy of “The Ransom Account of Atonement” as a full-on model, I would first like to say that **chapter 3** actually redirected me to another book. On a couple occasions Crisp speaks favorably of [Ben Myers](#)'s work in his “The Patristic Atonement Model” in [Locating the Atonement](#), which is so very good on so many levels and so very clear and revealing that I give a shout-out to it. Here's why.

Philosophically, it is rich in fleshing out the metaphysics behind his atonement model that carefully aligns with the Patristics. Historically, Myers shows how far off we've been in understanding the Patristics on atonement. Theologically, the atonement mechanism is inextricably tied to a robust two-natures Christology. Rhetorically, it's so very important to think critically on the use of metaphor and analogy in literature and not necessarily follow the trajectory of what others have written. Finally, the scope of Christ's accomplished work on the cross leaves no human behind! Christ elevates all of humanity. The crucified Christ provides the solution to human sin and the resurrected Christ provides a surplus to human nature. “He not only removes us from the clutches of death but also allows our nature to participate in his own incorruptible life” (p 87).

Back to Crisp. **Chapter 4** is critical in identifying nuanced differences between Anselm's satisfaction model and the penal model (developed later by the Reformers and partly leaning on Anselm). The two models should not be conflated.

Sometimes satisfaction is confused with penal substitution. The two doctrines do share a family resemblance ... However, satisfaction and penal substitution are not the same doctrine. The reason is simple: they have different accounts of what the atonement is, including different views of the mechanism by means of which Christ's work reconciles human beings to God (pp 68-69)

Whereas the satisfaction model involves a debt paid, for example, the penal model involves a punishment suffered. Both models share the same element of vicarious substitution (a debt owed paid by another; a punishment deserved laid on another). But, to my mind at least, the reason these two

# Oliver Crisp on *Approaching the Atonement*

accounts have been confused is that, in some sense, one might argue a punishment is incurred on both accounts, either a punishment of debt or a punishment of death.

Still, Anselm's model would not have Christ punished for sin (pp 69-70). This is because "Christ does not take upon himself our guilt, and he is not punished in our place. We remain the guilty parties, and Christ remains innocent [because] Anselm's view seems to be that satisfaction works on the same principles as a penalty (e.g., parking fines), not like a punishment (e.g., a custodial sentence)." (p 75)

On the analogy of a parking fine paid by another (p 69), I can see how the models are similar enough to be confused. As already mentioned, where a debt is owed a penalty has been incurred. The payment may satisfy the debt but in some respect *the penalty is the debt* since the one paying it suffers "punishment", as it were, by having to shell out money on behalf of another.

We find more light is shed and less confusion results in **chapter 6**, "Penal Substitutionary Atonement", as Crisp presses the analogy further. The gist of the penal model is this: The demands of God's moral law are satisfied by Christ being punished in the place of sinners and the benefits from Christ's atoning work on the cross are for the faithful. Passages supporting this claim include Isaiah 53:4-6; Romans 3:21-26; 2 Corinthians 5:21. As expected, there are objections with a variety of responses.

One objection is that violence is "valorized". The use of violence, it is argued, is viewed as virtuous whenever it is God who acts, despite the fact that violence of any stripe is morally reprehensible. To this objection Crisp responds that this is weak, since it impugns God's character as only wrathful and angry rather than one who can simultaneously love and be angry with the same subjects. One might respond that "God's wrath is an expression of his love as it is mediated by his justice". In addition, the use of anthropomorphic expressions in relation to divine justice serves to soften the charge of making violence a virtue (pp 103-104).

Others charge the penal model as depicting Christ's death as a form of "divine child abuse" (p 100). But Crisp rightly dispels this by filtering it through Trinitarian theology. Since "the Father and the Son are one entity in a very strong sense" (p 101, emphasis original), the parent is not numerically distinct from the child as in human relations. Thus, the Trinity readily dismisses this charge.

Perhaps the most serious accusation against the penal model is that it is contrary to human moral intuition about justice. Laying consequences for wrongdoing upon an innocent person hardly seems fair. After all, "an innocent person is, by definition, blameless," so punishing the wrong person is simply a travesty of justice (p 106). It's one thing for a parking fine to be paid on behalf of another who is culpable, but it is quite another for someone to suffer the consequences for murder when they in fact are not guilty! For in the former example, the law requires only that the fine is paid, whereas in the latter instance the transfer of guilt is at issue (pp 108-110). Punishment and consequences may be transferable but the innocent assuming guilt is not on any scale of justice.

This raises a substantial and significant question for advocates of the penal model: How is guilt transferred to Christ as the sin-bearer while maintaining God is just? This "is a deep theological problem that defenders of penal substitution must address." Maybe God relaxes the requirement of guilt and only demands the consequences of sin be paid. Crisp concludes with a hint toward his own

# Oliver Crisp on *Approaching the Atonement*

theory, namely, that “Christ’s union with fallen humanity in his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection” addresses these issues adequately (p 112). More on this below.

“The Problem of Atoning Violence” is the burden of **chapter 8**. What exactly is the problem? “It is the idea that violent acts are morally objectionable, so that bringing about reconciliation or atonement through violent means is morally unsustainable” (p 131). To get God out of the dock, one might advance that “the redemptive violence response makes the mistake of conflating intention and action, so that God ends up coopting violence for his own ends” (pp 144). When violence is instead viewed through a bifocal lens of intentionality and action, the problem is significantly weakened. True those seeking Christ’s death may enact harm, but God’s intentions for permitting it are only to heal and to reconcile. A kind of “double-effect” solution is suggested whereby divine intention and human action are distinct. Crisp proffers “God may bring about acts for good ends that include violence, though he does not intend that violence” (p 145). This solution, along with a robust Trinitarian belief, averts the notion that God purposes violence and intentionally pours out wrath on his Son (a psychologically engaging idea that involves not a little “rhetorical flourishing” when making its appeal).

While previous chapters fairly summarize the strengths and shortcomings of traditional atonement models, **chapter 10** outlines an alternative model Crisp calls the “union model of atonement.” This relies on a realist ontology that will become clearer in the following quote (see further his [\*The Word Enfleshed\*](#), pp 130ff where he goes into greater depth).

The central claim of the union account is this: Fallen human beings are somehow really united to Adam so that Adam plus his progeny constitutes an entity, called *fallen humanity*. What is more, those who are believers are also somehow really united to Christ so that they too constitute a real, distinct entity called *redeemed humanity*. Fallen and redeemed humanity are, in fact, overlapping entities. A person can be a member of both of these groups .... my union with Adam in fallen humanity depends on fallen humanity being a *real* composite entity, as real as ... rocks ... Similarly ... redeemed humanity is a real composite entity as well. (pp 167-168, emphasis original)

Some more dubious theological holes are filled by this model. For example, Christ through his death is able to pay the penal consequences of sin without himself becoming guilty. This means, at least, that my guilt remains but also that my moral/legal standing before God is changed, not as the *cause* of my union with Christ, rather as a *result* of it. It’s not as if God waves a wand and declares me righteous based on faith alone in Christ and then I am united to Christ. Instead, I am united to Christ in his humanity and, therefore, declared righteous. My relationship with God changed *because* I am united to Christ. I am not united to Christ *because* of a change in my relationship with God. This view puts Christ at the hub or center of all that goes on in the salvific event. It is in Christ, through Christ, and by Christ that my moral/legal standing before God is set right. Crisp’s words, but my emphasis, ring true:

God unites us with Christ so that we participate in his saving work, and, *as a consequence of this*, he is able to treat us as those justified in his sight. *Our real union with Christ* in salvation *brings about* our moral and legal change of status in the sight of God. In a similar manner, the real union of hearts between two lovers is what gives rise to their desire to be legally joined together in matrimony; it is not that they are legally joined together and on that basis find a union of hearts in their marriage. (p 169)

## Oliver Crisp on *Approaching the Atonement*

Still, concerns do not altogether disappear in the union atonement model. How it is, for example, that Adam's sin is transferred to every person placing everyone into the same common stock of fallen humanity? This remains a legitimate issue. So, Crisp takes on this challenge by appealing to mereology (relationships of parts to wholes and parts to parts within a group). I find Crisp's explanation satisfying because it places union with Christ front and center and is consistent with his thesis.

The action of Adam in sinning distributes to all subsequent humans because he [Adam] stands in for all subsequent humans – not primarily because his primal sin imputed to them, but because they inherit the effects his sin has wrought upon all subsequent human beings as only the first sin of the first human being can [think diseased acorn distributing the sickness throughout the life of an oak tree]. In a similar way, the action of Christ in atonement distributes to all members of redeemed humanity [think healthy branch grafted into the diseased oak tree providing healing], not primarily because his merit is imputed to them, but because his merit is really communicated to them by the work of the Holy Spirit who unites believers to Christ. (p 170)

2 Corinthians 5:21 is critically relevant here and Crisp addresses it by explaining how believers are grafted into redeemed humanity. As the second Adam (see Romans 5:12-19), the guiltless Christ “becomes sin” by way of taking on the penal consequences of sin passed on to redeemed humanity from the first Adam who are also part of fallen humanity. Suffering the penal consequences of sin is not the same as being guilty for sin (p 178). As I understand Crisp, by standing in for redeemed humanity and taking on the consequences of fallen humanity, Christ heals the disease and grafts believers into his perfect humanity (union; think vine/branches, cf., John 15). And so, Christ remains guiltless, the redeemed remain guilty but are united to Christ's human nature which cures the disease and begins the process of changing believers' from the inside out. This is accomplished by way of Christ's divine nature through the work of the Holy Spirit. And this is the moment of reconciliation (p 173).

In systematically laying out the framework of the union model of atonement, one premise is critical, which I expected Crisp to make more of since it involves the incarnation. He writes: “As the hub or intersection between divinity and humanity, Christ is a fitting means by which humans may be reconciled to God. As the God-human he is able to act on behalf of both God and humanity, communicating between them” (pp 174-175). The incarnation, by my lights, satisfies the requirement for a mechanism of atonement in the union model. He is a “fitting means” indeed!

*Approaching the Atonement* provides an engaging discussion and fair-minded overview of various atonement models. Crisp's own Christo-centric reading of atonement is philosophically robust, biblically responsible, theologically sensitive, and historically informed. Views handed down through the ages and argued for in the pulpits modulate on a spectrum where some aspects are foregrounded over others or ignored altogether. The view Crisp puts forth has managed to engage every major model from Patristics to contemporary works equitably, charitably, and objectively. *Highly recommended!*