

**Excerpts from sermon “Risky Business” on March 21, 2010.
More information about atonement theories can be found online.**

- Mark and Matthew both give us the image “the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many”
 - Ransom in the Bible is the word “lutron”. It is the only instance of use in the New Testament
- The Gospel of Luke’s understanding of the atonement is that Jesus’ death was that of the innocent prophet
 - We are to repent about our ignorance about the Messiah and for killing him because we did not know his true identity
- John’s gospel presents Jesus’ death as his achievement of glory, victory and eternal life for all of us
- Paul’s letters, which were written earlier than the gospels, give us many images
 - Paul’s images of the Jesus’ death range from:
 - Jesus as an instrument of reconciliation
 - Jesus as the way of obtaining expiation or atonement
 - Jesus as the priest making the atoning sacrifice...to Jesus himself as the atoning sacrifice
- It is the various biblical images and understandings of the atonement that the early church fathers interpreted to understand the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross
- While researching online theories of atonement, I found 22 theories. Most not very popular, but a few that have been with us throughout history, even if we are unaware of them.

Theories of Atonement

- **The Ransom Theory of Atonement** also known as the Bargain or Classical theory was put forth by Origen , Irenaeus and Gregory of Nyssa who believed that Jesus’ death was payment to the devil for human freedom
 - Origen interpreted the disobedience of Adam and Eve as causing God to abandon humankind to the devil, who then exerted his power over us. Later, when God decided to reconcile with us, God agreed to pay Satan a ransom for our release, the death of Jesus. After the crucifixion, Satan kept his part of the bargain by releasing humans from his power, but God pulled a trick on Satan by resurrecting Jesus
 - For the first 1000 years of Christianity, the Ransom theory was the common explanation of why Jesus had to suffer and die
- **Christus Victor** put forth by Gustaf Aulen in 1931 is similar to the ransom theory but instead of God paying Satan for our release, Jesus freed us by directly defeating the Evil One. And his resurrection proved that death can also be conquered. It is a theory that is popular today with modern Eastern Orthodox Christians and some Evangelical Christians
- There are a number of theories that fall into the **substitutionary models of atonement or vicarious substitutionary atonement**
 - **The Satisfaction Theory or Debt Theory** interpreted by the 11th c scholar St. Anselm

- Anselm didn't like the Ransom theory – the devil was an outlaw and had no right to exert power over humankind.
- God didn't need to pay Satan anything for our release
- According to Anselm, humankind owes a debt to God because we dishonored God through our disobedience and sin
- But God's pride and the need for universal justice prevents God from simply forgiving us.
- To resolve the matter, Jesus volunteered to pay our debt for us by suffering and dying on the cross.
- The only suitable action to offset the dishonor we did to God was the death of a perfectly sinless god-man who represented all of humanity
- God accepted this act of love as a full atonement and since God was satisfied, forgave us and offered us salvation
- **The Penal Theory** is a modification of Anselm's theory and was held by Martin Luther and John Calvin
 - God's mercy replaces God's wrath after the infinite sacrifice of Jesus on the cross
 - In the Penal theory, human sin is not seen as dishonoring God but sin incurs a debt to God which requires repayment
 - The punishment for sin must involve the shedding of blood through the ritual sacrifice of a human
- **The Moral Theory or Moral Influence Theory** believes that Jesus tried to help us obtain salvation by giving us a perfect moral example of how to live
 - Jesus hoped his teachings and his example would inspire us to lift ourselves out of sin and into true communion with God
 - Christians have found it attractive but wonder why Jesus could not have given us his teachings and moral example without dying on the cross
 - One theory is that his death, though unnecessary, helped to draw attention to his life and that made his mission more effective
- **Theory of God's Will by Leslie Weatherhead,** who lived from 1893-1976, an English Christian theologian and Methodist minister.
 - Rev. Weatherhead's answer to "Why did Jesus have to die?" was that he did not have to die
 - Weatherhead believed that at any moment in Jesus' journey to the cross, the people around him could have done what was right
 - They could have followed God's will, been part of the salvation of the world by listening to Jesus' teachings
 - Jesus' death was not preordained by God. Jesus' teachings were nonviolent, "turn the other cheek," "love your enemy," "love your neighbor as yourself. If Jesus reflected the will of God, how could that same God require a violent, shameful death on a cross as a sign of love?"
- The atonement is the centerpiece of our faith because it asks a very important question "**How is Jesus the connection between divinity and humanity?**"