

The Meaning of the Death of Jesus: A Violent Means to a Nonviolent End Part One

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Just before the Jewish Passover was to be celebrated in Jerusalem, in approximately 30 AD, a Jewish man named Yeshua, a carpenter by trade from the village of Nazareth, at the request of the Jewish Sanhedrin and by the authority of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, was executed on a Roman cross along with two criminals on the rocky hills just outside the city of Jerusalem. This fact, by itself, is not very remarkable as the Romans are known to have executed thousands of men of Israel during their lengthy occupation of the region. What was unique about this particular act of religiously motivated, state-sanctioned violence was that the person who was put to death and placed in a tomb was later reported as being seen alive by numerous eyewitnesses. This man, Yeshua, known to the world by his Greek name Jesus, has been believed by countless men and women during the past 2000 years to be the Son of God.

While there has certainly been much debate regarding the authenticity of his resurrection, even among those who claim to be his followers, there is little dispute, except among the extreme fringes of Christianity, that Jesus died on the cross. The canonical writings of the witnesses of the risen Christ, known today as the New Testament, share a common belief that Jesus Christ died, was resurrected, ascended to God and will come again to reign on the earth.

This article is concerned with the theological meaning of the death of Jesus the Christ, particularly the violent nature of his death. It is commonly held by the followers of Jesus dating back to his earliest disciples that there is a salvific meaning to the death of Jesus. As the Apostle Paul summarized for the Corinthian believers: "The tradition I handed on to you in the first place, a tradition which I had myself received, was that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he was buried; and that on the third day, he was raised to life in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

Why did Jesus die? The simple answer is "for our sins." There is an elegant simplicity in the statement "Christ died for our sins." Yet that simple statement fails to satisfy the myriad of questions proffered by philosophers and theologians, skeptics and even the most trusting of believers. It begs deeper questions: What actual purpose was achieved in the crucifixion of Jesus? What benefit does Jesus'

death offer to sinners? Was a violent death necessary in order for sinners to attain the benefits of Jesus' death? If so, why?

These questions and others relating to the death of Jesus have provided much fuel for contemplation and discussion over the last two millennia. They were raised again at the beginning of 2004 with the arrival of the screen adaptation of the crucifixion of Jesus, *The Passion of the Christ* directed by Mel Gibson. Gibson's attempt to render an artistically captivating and biblically faithful image of the story of the last twelve hours of Jesus' life provides a vivid, profoundly disturbing image of violence and brutality that leaves the viewer wondering "Why?" Why is humanity capable of such incredible violence? In an age when we are daily confronted with violent images in both news and entertainment; when the typical American child will have been confronted with 200,000 dramatized acts of violence and 40,000 dramatized murders by the time they reach the age of 18;¹⁴ when our senses have been numbed by images of children bringing assault rifles into their schools and gunning down their fellow students and by the two towers of the World Trade Center being brought down by terrorists using jumbo jets as bombs; and in a society that kills its unborn children with impunity at the rate of over 1.5 million per year, why is it that the image of the abuse and death of one man as portrayed in *The Passion of the Christ* is so disturbing? Could it be because it is difficult for us to reconcile the violence and brutality of the crucifixion of Jesus with the belief that "God is love"? (1 John 4:16).

It is the task of theologians, preachers and apologists to interpret the Scriptures in an intelligible way to both the community of faith and the broader society, that they may see and understand more clearly the purposes of God in His actions throughout history, particularly as they pertain to humanity's salvation. How can we interpret the salvific meaning of the violent death of Jesus to an age that is saturated with images of violence? How do we help the tens of thousands of innocent women and children who suffer each year from physical and sexual abuse at the hands of violent perpetrators to understand God as a loving Father who apparently willed the violent death of His innocent son? How do we assist the parents of students who have been murdered by their fellow students at schools such as Columbine to understand why a loving God either allowed or perhaps willed their children to die in the same way He allowed or willed His own son to die? "Why did my child have to die?" is one of the most gut-wrenching questions any parent asks in the face of senseless, violent death. Yet, for two millennia the Christian church has tried to interpret the meaning of the violent death of God's son.

¹⁴ Lt. Col. Dave Grossman and Gloria DeGaetano, *Stop Teaching our Kids to Kill*, Crown, 1999, 1.

In this article we will provide a survey and critique of the various ways that theology has attempted to find meaning in the violent death of Jesus. We will view some of the interpretations provided to Christendom by Orthodox Catholic theology, the magisterial reformers, the radical reformers and churches that trace their heritage through the Radical Reformation, as well as modern liberal, feminist and pacifist theology. We will give particular attention to the idea of scapegoating and its role in interpreting the salvation drama of Christ's violent death. We will then consider whether there is a causal link between the church's sometimes faulty theologies of atonement and the proliferation of violence in our society.

One of the earliest written documents of the Christian faith is Paul's letter to the Galatians. In it Paul offers this assertion regarding the meaning of Christ's crucifixion: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by being cursed for our sake since Scripture says: Anyone hanged is accursed, so that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus and so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:13-14). Here Paul clearly states that the purpose of Christ's death is to redeem us from the curse of the law. The English word *redeem* is a translation of the Greek *exagorazo* which means to purchase or pay a price. Paul says that somehow the death of Christ pays the price to set humanity free from the curse of the law by becoming the curse in a representative way, with the goal of making the blessings of God, originally promised to Abraham and his offspring (the Abrahamic covenant declared in Genesis), available to all people of all nations. To Paul, the core meaning of the death of Jesus is to achieve the purpose of bringing the blessings promised to Abraham (inheritance of the land/earth as part of a unique covenant relationship between humanity and the one God) to the Jews and Gentiles. It would be impossible for Paul to understand the death of Jesus apart from the Abrahamic covenant. For the early church the covenant with Abraham was the milieu in which the crucifixion of Jesus was to be interpreted. This is just as true in the 21st century as it was in the first century. To be rightly understood, the crucifixion must be interpreted through the lens of the covenant made with Abraham. Otherwise we run the risk of misapplying and misinterpreting the death of Jesus. This is, as we shall see, precisely what the church in later generations did.

A study of the history of the doctrine of the atonement shows us that the early church was content to accept the basic "What" of the atonement, without the need to emphasize the "Why." One of the earliest post-canonical creedal statements, the Roman creed, which was used by the church at least by the beginning of the fifth century, says, "I believe...in Christ Jesus, His only Son our Lord...who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried, on the third day rose again from the dead...[I believe in] the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the

flesh.”¹⁵ We note here the simply expressed belief that Christ Jesus was “crucified and buried” and “rose again from the dead” and that belief in the crucified and risen Christ has a causal relationship to “the forgiveness of sins” and “the resurrection of the flesh.” There is no attempt to offer an explanation of precisely how the death and resurrection of Jesus facilitates that forgiveness and resurrection.

One noteworthy theologian and church historian has rightly noted that:

Throughout the first five centuries of the Christian era the Church was content to assert this principle [that God was present in Christ] for the sake of our salvation — without elaborating theories as to the exact method by which that salvation was accomplished. Many individuals attempted to think out the mode in which atonement had been made, but the Church as a whole embraced no theory... We owe a debt of gratitude to the Fathers who in their wisdom were content to state principles and to refrain from making theories, especially in view of the fact that the attempts at theorizing which individual thinkers of this period put forward are crude and unsatisfactory... The New Testament, the creeds... all insist upon the great principle that God in Christ has redeemed man, but there is nowhere in them a hint of theory.¹⁶

Richardson goes on to argue that:

Since early times men have attempted to explain this principle by means of theories about the fact of the Atonement, in which they have attempted to explain the exact mode of salvation. But we must remember that the Church as a whole is committed to no theory, but only to the great principle which underlies the Christian experience of forgiveness. So long as we safeguard the principle, we are in fact free to construct our own theory, if we wish to do so, without in any sense being disloyal to historical teachings of the Church.¹⁷

The author of this article considers the position stated by Canon Richardson to be untenable. As we review the history of Christian doctrine as pertaining to the “Why” of the death of Christ and the many theories regarding its meaning, we can see evidence of great damage resulting in devastating consequences to the Christian faith. Error in doctrine and dogma has proved to have many negative consequences. Let us now consider some of these theories.

One of the first major theories of the Atonement comes from Origen c. AD 200. Origen articulated a theory known as the “ransom theory” of the atonement.

¹⁵ Gerald Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ*, Intervarsity Press, 1984, 101.

¹⁶ Alan Richardson, *Creeds in the Making*, Fortress Press, 1981, 96-97.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

He rightly noted that Jesus himself had said that “the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Origen began to speculate, asking the question “To whom was the ransom paid?” His answer was that, through sin, man has “sold his soul to the devil” and therefore a ransom had to be paid to the Devil to purchase man’s soul back. In dying on the cross, Jesus paid the ransom to the Devil and bought man back from the Devil. While Origen proposed this theory among others, his successors Gregory of Nyssa and Rufinus became apologists for this teaching. They used images such as a fish hook catching a fish (Christ’s flesh is the bait; his divinity is the hook) or snaring a bird or trapping a mouse (Augustine likened the cross to the trap and Christ’s blood to the bait on the trap).¹⁸ This theory received widespread support throughout the western Latin portion of the Church until about the 12th century.

It is difficult for a 21st-century Westerner to imagine how such a theory could have achieved such widespread approval and acceptance. Yet, the Bible does refer to Satan as “the god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4). In the minds of many, the Devil had been granted authority over man by God at the fall in the garden, thus “If God had in fact granted the Devil some kind of right over us, then justice demanded that God pay some kind of quit-claim to the Dark Lord.”¹⁹ The Scriptures are clear that part of Jesus’ mission was to “crush” the serpent while himself being “bruised” (Gen. 3:15) and that the reason the son of man came was to “destroy the works of the Devil” (I John 3:8). It is difficult to imagine how the Devil could be destroyed by receiving a ransom payment. One normally assumes that when a kidnapper takes someone hostage and receives a ransom, he has won. Let it suffice that this highly flawed theory eventually succumbed to other theories.

The ransom theory gave way in the late eleventh century to a new theory known variously as the “commercial theory”²⁰ or “satisfaction” or “objective” theory of the atonement. The chief proponent of this theory was the Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm.

[In his work *Cur Deus Homo (Why the God Man?)* Anselm] opposed the popular view that Christ’s death repaid a debt owed to the Devil, a mortgage payment that freed humanity from Satan’s enslavement. He offered, rather, a satisfaction, an objective or a commercial view that professed a debt owed, but one to God and not to the Devil. Anselm likened God to a monarch who has been denied proper honor (a reflection in images of the medieval society in which he lived). Every

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages*, Cornell University Press, 1986, 105.

²⁰ Alva Huffer, *Systematic Theology*, Restitution Herald, 1987, 296.

sinner thus owes God satisfaction. Because God is infinite, only an infinite satisfaction would be appropriate. No one else, though, could make infinite satisfaction but God. And no one but a human being should make a human satisfaction on behalf of humanity. Thus for Anselm it was a logical necessity that God become human and die for the sins of human beings, rendering the satisfaction.²¹

Anselm's theology was developed in an age of chivalry:

In the days of chivalry it was possible to atone for an offence either by receiving the due punishment or by rendering "satisfaction," that is, by the restitution of the honor which had been outraged. God did not punish mankind because that would have meant the damnation of the whole human race; instead he found for man a way of rendering satisfaction so that the violated divine honor might be repaired. Man himself was unable to render satisfaction to God; therefore God in his mercy sent his Son who assumed manhood, and who, as man, rendered ample satisfaction by his innocent death.²²

Anselm's theory was very quick to become the predominant theory of the atonement and it continued to hold sway through the Protestant Reformation where it was refashioned in legal terms by John Calvin. Calvin's version of the satisfaction theory provides "the model of a substitute who bears the punishment of other men in order that the others may escape their punishment and be forgiven. The context of the model is legal through and through."²³ This stands to reason as Calvin was a trained lawyer who was working to establish a theocracy with a new set of laws. To this Calvin added the idea of "limited Atonement," that Christ served as a substitute only for the "elect" who were predestined by God for salvation.

At the heart of this theory is the notion that God, who is worthy of all honor, has been greatly dishonored by man's sin and must have His honor satisfied. Jesus did so by voluntarily dying on the cross. This makes the basis of the atonement not the love of God (John 3:16) but rather the honor of God.

This theory has had its share of critics, none more vocal than the Unitarian Hosea Ballou who in 1805 wrote in his *Treatise on the Atonement*:

The belief that the great Jehovah was offended with his creatures to that degree, that nothing but the death of Christ or the endless misery of mankind, could appease his anger, is an idea that has done more injury to the Christian religion than the writings of all its opposers, for many centuries. The error has been fatal to the life and spirit of the religion of

²¹ Rogers, MacKenzie, Weeks, *Case Studies in Christ and Salvation*, Westminster Press, 1977, 54.

²² Richardson, 102.

²³ Fisher Humphreys, *The Death of Christ*, Broadman Press, 1978, 57.

Christ in our world; all those principles which are to be dreaded by men have been believed to exist in God; and professors have been molded into the image of their deity and become more cruel.²⁴

This theory has been so universally accepted within Christendom over the past 1000 years that it is similar to the doctrine of the Trinity in that it is read into texts, assumed, taken for granted. The faithful student of the Scripture must go back to the actual texts and ask if they really say that Christ had to die to satisfy God's honor. Is Ballou correct when he charges that those "principles which are to be dreaded by men have been believed to exist in God"? Jesus taught clearly that if one strikes you on the right cheek — which in his time was a display of dishonor tantamount to inviting someone to "step outside" and "have it out" — you are to "turn the other cheek," allowing yourself to be again dishonored, rather than demanding that your honor be restored by fighting. Yet, if Anselm's satisfaction theory is true, then an all-powerful, all-loving Father in heaven is incapable of turning the other cheek. God is unable to allow His honor to go unpunished, and so He must have His pound of flesh, in this case the death of His Son, to satisfy His honor. Is this consistent with the Scriptures' assertion that "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love...He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities...so great is His love for those who fear Him...As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him" (Ps. 103:8-13, NIV)?

Jonathan Edwards, the famed eighteenth-century American evangelical theologian, believed that the crucifixion "was willed and ordered by God," a condition that made "one of the most heinous things that ever was done" by men, "one of the most horrid of all acts," into "the most admirable and glorious of all events." For Edwards, at least, "the crucifixion of Christ was not evil but good." This argument, however, implies that God the Father was directly responsible for the death of His only earthly son...Surely we must wonder if it is likely that the chastisement and scourging of Jesus before his crucifixion would become the model for Christian parents to follow with their children in the centuries to come?²⁵

Greven offers the bold assertion that at the heart of much modern-day physical abuse against children, we can discover the root of a faulty image of God as an abusive parent.

²⁴ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, Beacon Press, 2002, 30.

²⁵ Philip Greven, *Spare the Child*, Vintage Books, 1992, 50.

If God is indeed loving, gracious and compassionate as the Psalmist asserts, shouldn't He at least be able to forgive a childish display of dishonor toward Him without demanding that the child be punished to the point of death? If an earthly father were to be dishonored by his son and responded by requiring that that child be punished to the point of death in order to defend the father's honor, how would we view that father? This is the alcoholic tyrant who savagely beats his child. Society would call that father an abusive monster and demand he be punished. And yet for nearly 1000 years Christians have accepted a theory of God which originated in the days of feudal lords. We might expect such behavior from Stalin, Hitler or even Saddam Hussein, but certainly not from a loving Father in heaven.

Is it any wonder that, as Ballou observes, "professors [of this satisfaction theory of atonement] have been molded into the image of their deity and become more cruel"? Can we now better appreciate the impetus of the Christian crusaders who rode to the Holy City and took up the sword against those Muslims who dared to dishonor the Lord's city? Can we better appreciate the driving force behind much of the church's violent anti-Semitism against the Jews who dishonored God by murdering His Son? Can we better understand how the disciples of the man Jesus, who taught that we are to love our enemies, have found justification for waging war against their enemies? There's an old saying that parents repeat to their children: "Do as I say, not as I do." This is a rather blatant form of hypocrisy, and yet this is exactly the picture of God that is painted by the satisfaction theory of the atonement. This God is no better than the Pharisees that Jesus so roundly condemns in the Gospels.

Anselm's satisfaction theory has certainly had a lengthy list of detractors, but none more noteworthy than Abelard, who offered in place of both the satisfaction theory and ransom theory the "moral influence" or "subjective" theory:

Abelard argued against the idea that God was a dishonored lord whose honor was restored by the murder of His own son. Instead, he said the problem is that human beings see neither their sin nor the mercy of God. The death of the Son of God brings human beings face to face with cruelty. Contemplating the suffering of Christ, people will feel remorse and repentance — especially seeing that Christ submitted to violence rather than turning it back on his enemies. A love so great that it withholds evil for evil reveals the mercy and kindness of God. Seeing this, Abelard said, human beings would be moved to stop rejecting God and would open their hearts to receive God's mercy.²⁶

This theory provides a more consistent picture of a loving Father in heaven than a tyrant who must have his pound of flesh to pay for his dishonor. The God

²⁶ Brock and Parker, 40.

that is revealed through Jesus has a character that is consistent with the expectations that He places on His children. In his *Exposition on the Epistle to the Romans*, Abelard writes:

Who will forgive God for the sin of killing His own child? How cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should in any way please him that an innocent man should be slain — still less that God should consider the death of His son so agreeable that by it He should be reconciled to the whole world.²⁷

The moral influence theory has become the popular choice among religious liberals. “The importance of Jesus for liberal Christians is not that he paid the price for sin. Jesus is important because he embodied loving concern for others and called people to love their neighbors. Jesus confronted the oppressive rulers of his day and was not afraid to risk his life doing so. No greater love has any human being than the love that sacrifices self to help and defend others.”²⁸

Walter Rauschenbusch was one of the major architects of the “social gospel” in the 19th century. He wrote about the nature of the social gospel and the atonement. He called the death of Christ “the supreme revelation of love.” He said that “every real improvement of society gives love a freer chance.” “Jesus put love to the front of his teaching. He was ready to accept love for God and man as a valid equivalent for the customary religious and ethical duties.” He then observed, “If Jesus had died a natural death, posterity would still treasure his teaching, coupled with the commentary of his life, as the most beautiful exposition of love. But its effectiveness was greatly increased by his death. Death has a strange power over the human imagination and memory...If a significant death is added to a brave and self-sacrificing life, the effect is great.”²⁹

There is certainly much to be recommended in this theory of the atonement. It is consistent with what Jesus actually taught, and it gives far greater emphasis to the love of God than to the honor of God, as Anselm and Calvin did. It does not make God out to be a bloodthirsty tyrant or abusive father, nor does it offer religious sanction for violence. But what it does do is rob Jesus Christ of his uniqueness as God’s anointed. It makes the martyrdom of Jesus of no greater salvific value than that of Stephen, or the Christian preacher Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., or even the Indian apostle of non-violent resistance, Mohandas Gandhi. While these were certainly important men whose tragic and violent deaths helped to add to their power and legend, nevertheless they were not God’s chosen

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁹ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, 270.

Messiah as revealed in the holy Scriptures, and their deaths cannot be placed on equal footing with the death of Jesus.

The fatal flaw of the moral influence theory is that it fails to take seriously the clearly articulated message of the Scripture that Jesus' death very specifically has the power to "save people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Jesus' death is not dependent upon humanity doing something to add to it. "Man saves himself by looking upon the Crucified. The extent to which reconciliation is achieved depends ultimately upon what men do, upon their conversion or repentance; and thus, in the long run, God's attitude towards mankind — whether He is able to forgive them or not — depends upon their attitude towards Jesus."³⁰

There is certainly biblical truth contained within the moral influence theory of atonement, yet it doesn't provide a complete picture. Later we will see how some have built upon this theory to provide a more complete and satisfying picture of the Atonement. But now we will provide an overview of a theory which shares many common points with the moral influence theory but has particular relevance for the readers of *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*. This is the martyr or example theory that finds its roots in the Radical Reformation, most notably in the writings of Faustus Socinus and the *Racovian Catechism* which reflects the thinking of 17th-century unitarians in Poland.

Huffer summarizes this theory as follows:

[Adherents to the example/martyr theory] declare that man is able to save himself provided he has a good motive and a proper example to follow. All that needs to be changed, they assert, is man's attitude. They assert that man's subjective sinfulness is the only barrier between man and God, and that there is nothing in God's nature which requires that sin's penalty must be paid. According to them, Christ's death did not satisfy or propitiate the holiness of God; the results of his death were entirely manward. They teach that Christ's martyrdom saves man by showing him the way of faith, obedience and eternal life through setting an example of true obedience and inspiring him to imitate his faithfulness.³¹

This shares with Abelard's moral influence theory an entirely subjective understanding of salvation. Christ's death was about what human beings do as a response to the example provided by Jesus. Socinus rejected the whole notion that God's honor had to be satisfied.

That the atonement was not, after all, a penal satisfaction is clear, for Socinus, in two respects. First of all, the Bible asserts that God's purpose was to forgive the sins of the whole world. There should, therefore, be no such palpable contradiction between the purpose proposed and the

³⁰ Richardson, 108.

³¹ Huffer, 294.

supposed means. A debt cannot be both remitted and satisfactorily repaid, for in remission of a debt the debtor is freed from his obligation and the creditor renounces his claim to satisfaction. That a penal satisfaction to God is also impossible is all the more manifest when the analogy of redemption moves from pecuniary debt to a penalty involving life. A person other than the debtor can, to be sure, pay a debt, but he cannot endure for another capital punishment leading to eternal death. Transference of a capital penalty to an innocent person is intolerably unjust and, when writ large in terms of the divine redemption, mocks the very idea of a righteous God. That the one innocent man, according to orthodox theory, who did die was also restored to life does not, for Socinus, attenuate the basic injustices of the original, divine exaction postulated.³²

Socinus identifies a key flaw in the satisfaction theory, in that if God has forgiven man's debt, it would render payment of the debt unnecessary. But if Jesus died to pay the debt of man's sin to God, then God cannot be said to have truly forgiven the debt. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray he asked the Father to "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." In order for the satisfaction theory to be true, it would render the possibility of forgiveness on God's part impossible. Jesus would have taught his disciples to do something that God was incapable of doing.

One of the foremost historians of the unitarian movement summarizes the Socinian martyr theory of the atonement as follows:

Christ showed us the way to return to God, and how to be reconciled to Him. He was without sin, and lived a life of such holiness that no one has ever approached him in sanctity, and he came next to God Himself in holiness. By the incomparable power to work miracles which God would have given to no other, he proved his teaching true. He suffered that he might give us an example how to bear our own sufferings, though not to atone for our sins for God forgives men freely, and reconciled us to God.³³

This can be contrasted with another unitarian view of the death of Christ (Church of God, Faith of Abraham): "The wages of sin is death' (Rom. 6:23). God's holy nature requires that the penalty for every sin committed in the

³² George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, Truman State University Press, 2000, 755.

³³ Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism, Socinianism and its Antecedents*, Beacon Press, 1977, 414.

universe must be paid. The death of His son upon the cross was payment of sin's penalty for believers."³⁴

From yet another strand of unitarian thought (Christadelphian) with regard to the nature of the atonement:

God dealt with him (i.e. Christ) representatively. There is a great difference between a representative and a substitute. A representative is not disconnected from those represented. On the contrary, those represented go through with him all that he goes through. He does his part instead of those for whom he is the substitute, and these are dissociated from the transgression. Christ suffering as the representative of his people is one with them, and they are one with him. In what he went through they went through. Hence, Paul says believers were crucified with Christ and baptized into his death. This death he declares to have been "the declaration of the righteousness of God" which God required as the basis of the work of reconciliation and forgiveness (Rom. 3:24-26).³⁵

It is obvious that even with similar Christological strands of unitarian thought there is diversity regarding the nature of the Atonement. Representative voices within Church of God and Christadelphian traditions have, to varying degrees, adopted substitutionary or representative views of Christ's work, recognizing that the example theory does not fully reveal the true nature of Christ's death. The *Racovian Catechism* boldly asserts that:

The notion that Christ purchased our salvation or paid the debt for our sins is false...because the Scriptures everywhere testify that God forgives men their sins freely, and especially under the New Covenant (II Cor. 5:19; Rom. 3:24-25; Matt. 28:23, etc.). But to a free forgiveness nothing is more opposite than such a satisfaction as they contend for, and the payment of an equivalent price. For where a creditor is satisfied, either by the debtor himself, or by another person on the debtor's behalf, it cannot be with truth be said of him that he freely forgives the debt.³⁶

The radical unitarians were correct in challenging the internal consistency of the then popular satisfaction theory, and yet their alternative theory that Christ was simply a human who died as an example for others to follow is still insufficient. As Paul Tillich notes in his analysis of Socinian thought: "The priestly office of Christ is denied. He is prophet and king. The ideas about a substitutionary sacrifice or punishment or satisfaction for sin are meaningless and

³⁴ Huffer, 283.

³⁵ Robert Roberts, *Christendom Astray*, The Christadelphian, 1958, 169.

³⁶ *The Racovian Catechism*, 304-305.

self-contradictory, because guilt is always a personal thing and must be attributed to individuals...Justification is dissolved into a moralistic terminology. In order to be justified, we must keep the commandments.”³⁷ The Socinian martyr theory is certainly a helpful interpretation for a modern, post-enlightenment rationalistic liberal mindset in that it requires no mystery, no supernatural focus. It is entirely compatible with a humanistic Christianity, but beyond that, it suffers from failing to take into account the unique nature of Jesus Christ and his role in the salvation of humanity.

³⁷ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, Touchstone, 1972, 288.