



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Mythbusters 2, Pt 2
Why did Jesus die?

1 John 4:4–7a; Ephesians 3:14–19

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Well, is the bar ever high this morning. Here we are in the middle of another series, this time Mythbusters, the sequel! Last week we heard that it's the end of the world as we know it, as Pastor Greg debunked end of the world prophecies. And this morning, you have been promised that we will look at and answer questions like

- Why did Jesus die?
- Did God send Jesus to die for my sins?
- Did God want Jesus to die?" ...and all in 17 minutes.

I've discovered that this is big! While this can't and won't be an exhaustive exploration, it is an attempt to stir our thinking and to open the dialog. Thankfully the journey as followers of Jesus is one that never fully arrives. We return again and again to better understand and to become more closely the people that God has created us and is creating us to be!

My hope for this morning is that we can look at what for many Christians is a tripping hazard—the theory of atonement—to address some of the concerns and explore possibly new ways of understanding.

Daughter of this congregation, Kate Eisenbise Crell teaches religious studies at Manchester University in Indiana. In her book *Cooperative Salvation*¹, Kate looks at some of the questions we are asking. And she tells of an experience that played a significant role in her spiritual formation and in part led to her studies and writing. I asked her if I could share this story...

When she was in the fifth grade, Kate had two best friends. One was Roman Catholic, and the other—"Ashley"—was an evangelical protestant. One afternoon, the three of them were sitting in Ashley's kitchen chatting with her mom, who began telling them a cautionary tale. It was about a wonderful man who had died, after living a long, productive, and charitable life. The man arrived at the pearly gates and approached St. Peter, confident that he had lived a life worth of eternal

¹Crell, Kate Eisenbise, *Cooperative Salvation: A Brethren View of Atonement*, WIPF& STOCK, 2014.

2 reward. He had worked for social justice, he had contributed his time and money to charities, and he had generally been a good person. Unfortunately, he hadn't accepted Jesus as his personal savior, and therefore was condemned to hell for all of eternity. When Ashley's mom finished the story, Kate says she was distraught. What a horrible fate for the man. It just didn't quite seem right.

Most likely we all have encountered something like that, where it just doesn't make sense. It doesn't resonate with the loving God who has been part of our spiritual formation and journey.

It's almost part of our culture in some ways—the prevailing belief that Jesus died for our sins.

How many of us grew up reciting in church, every week, one of the ancient creeds:

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.*

I remember when I could finally say it from memory...I was so pleased with myself. But I couldn't quite understand why we believed in the holy catholic church when we were United Methodist through and through.

For our sake, Jesus was crucified... it's almost imprinted on our brains. And my guess is that many of us have felt distress similar to Kate's.

Known as the substitutionary understanding of the cross or Atonement Theory. To *atone* means an action that repairs a broken relationship. The premise is that Jesus died in our place for the punishment we all deserve as sinners. This

understanding of Jesus' death has been a core element of common Christianity for a long time and, I think it's fair to say, is a defining core belief of today's evangelical Christianity. The influence of this understanding extends beyond conservative Christians to other Protestants and Catholics. Many churches teach that in order to call yourself a Christian, you must believe and confess the Atonement Theory. There is an assumption that it is a part and parcel of orthodox Christianity. I've even heard churches labeled as "a secular church" if they don't embrace this atonement theory, if they don't encourage their kids and adults to say the sinner's prayer and accept Jesus' offer of substitution on the cross.

I do want to offer a disclaimer here—some find great meaning in atonement language. We like to sing the old songs—there is something comforting in the familiar. Often when I work with families to design a memorial service for a loved one, it's the old hymns, that offer solace to grieving hearts. It's more about feelings, more about connection perhaps than it is about theology.

To be sure, for millions of Christians, this atonement understanding has had great power. It has transformed lives. According to scholar and author Marcus Borg², it's important that we understand that at its very best, atonement theology expresses the depth of God's love and Jesus' love. For millions, this has been a powerfully transforming message of radical grace and acceptance.

- Jesus loves you so much that he died for you
- You matter so much to God that God gave up God's son for you
- Your sins are forgiven, and you are accepted, no matter how unworthy you think you are.

Borg continues: To the extent that this atonement language is understood to be the lens through which we understand

²Borg, Marcus, *Convictions: How I Learned What Matters Most*, HarperOne, 2014.

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God's great love for us, it has done little harm and much good. Many people have found great meaning in this understanding. At its very best, it has drawn people to God and to the gospel message of love.

This atonement understanding, however, can be dangerous when it is proclaimed to be the only understanding of Jesus' death and as the only fully legitimate understanding of the cross. The danger is that the atonement understanding often distorts, and even destroys what Christianity is all about—God's love for all. One theologian writes, "the theology of my childhood argued just the opposite of God's grace. God was angry. My sin offended God. He demanded justice. My debt had to be paid. God sat in heaven, scales in hand, scowling as my sins tipped the balance closer and closer to wrath. God was bent on my destruction."

One major historical problem of the atonement theory as the only correct understanding is this... It wasn't part of ancient Christianity but an innovation more than a 1000 years after the life of Jesus. The idea was first articulated in 1098 by a brilliant monk, priest, abbot, archbishop of Canterbury and saint, named Anselm. To help people understand Christianity, he used a model from his cultural-historical context which was the relationship between a feudal lord and his subjects. When a subject violated the lord's law, the honor of the Lord and the order of the law had to be preserved by the transgressor making a payment. For the lord to offer forgiveness without atonement would have been to invite anarchy. Anselm applied this model to our relationship with God. Payment was necessary to emphasize the wrath of God toward sin. And Anselm determined that Jesus should vicariously pay for our sins. Historically, this atonement theory then didn't appear for over 1000 years after Jesus ministry, crucifixion and resurrection.

Theologically, there are plenty of scriptures with which one could "back-up" this theory of atonement when those scriptures are taken literally. I looked up atonement scriptures and found that the top two websites listed over 100 scriptures each

that substantiate this understanding of God and God's ways. Often times these scriptures are used for proof-texting—singled out, not taken in context.

And I think that's what sometimes trips us up as we seek to understand and find it difficult to reconcile the scripture with what we experience of God.

I thought it would be interesting to select one of the passages listed as an atonement scripture and see what we might discover. In support of the atonement theory, we have heard these verses from 1 John quoted:

JOHN 4:4–7A

And you know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also.

Theologians observe that these words "no one comes to the Father except through me" have been used as a weapon with which to clobber one's opponents into theological submission. These words are often used as a litmus test for the Christian faith. This is the atonement theory at its worst.

As, however, we put these verses in context, the words express John's unshakable belief that the coming of Jesus, the word made flesh, decisively alters the relationship between God and humanity. These words affirm that Jesus, the way, the truth and the life, is the tangible presence of God and God's love in the world and that God can best known through the incarnate presence of Jesus. Humanity's encounter with Jesus makes possible a new experience of God and God's love for all. Two very different understandings.

So, given our culture today, given the prevailing assumptions of traditional Christianity, we ask again "Why did Jesus die? Did God send Jesus to die for my sins?"

Some time ago, there were headlines in a local newspaper. It reported the tragic death of a father who drowned while

6 trying to save his son, who had fallen into a river. The headline read: “Father Dies in Attempt to Save Son.” Think of how different that is from the atonement understanding of Jesus’ death: “Father Requires Death of Son.” Did God require the death of Jesus, his Son? If so, what does that say about God’s character, about what God is like?³

And I turn to one of my very favorite speaker and author, Philip Gulley, who writes: Jesus’ death was not God’s will.⁴ God didn’t send Jesus into the world to atone for sin. Jesus was born to live, learn and know God. Jesus’ ministry challenged and continues to challenge the inaccurate images of God that prevail. Jesus helps us to know God better and encourages us to live as people of God’s love and grace. Jesus threatened the prevailing powers of the day with a new way of living—Jesus ushered in the kingdom of God—a kingdom of goodness and grace, much unlike the worldly kingdoms of injustice, and power and oppression. Jesus wasn’t born to die—Jesus came to teach us how to live God’s love. He didn’t die to appease an angry God. He came to proclaim a God of grace.

Jesus’ death was a human act rather than a divine mandate. People, not God, demanded his crucifixion. The powers-that-be crucified him on a cross. Jesus didn’t simply die—he was killed, executed in a very specific way. Crucifixion was a Roman form of capital punishment reserved only for those who defied imperial authority. Ordinary criminals, like murderers and thieves, were executed in other ways or condemned to different kinds of slave labor. But crucifixion was a very public form of execution that sent a message: this is what Rome does to those who challenge imperial authority.

I’d like to circle back to Kate’s book. In it she proposes a Brethren understanding of salvation—personal and social. I commend this book to us and I hope that we can use it to

³Ibid.

⁴Gulley, Philip and James Mulholland, *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2003.

continue the conversation—maybe *Mythbusters* 3 ???—as we seek to live the love of God.

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When our youngest daughter was about 6 or 7 she went with a friend to see the “donut man,” a juggler and children’s comedian performing at a local church. It only took until the end of the day for us to discover that they must have had an altar call of sorts for the children attending. When we tucked her into bed that night, she said her prayers as usual, but ended with thanks that Jesus died for her sins, a plea for forgiveness and the invitation for Jesus to come into her heart. We didn’t make a big deal out of it, just assured her that God loves her and so do we. And then, the next night, she repeated the confession and invitation. And we repeated the assurances. This went on for several days until she seemed satisfied that all was well and that she was loved by God and by us.

Don’t know if you remember or not, but 10 years ago this week we had quite a winter storm, resulting in a day off for students and adults alike. The several inches of snow was beautiful and the bright sunshine made it almost enchanting. But the roads were treacherous. We couldn’t go anywhere. It was a perfect day in the world of this Buckeye girl. I was preparing the sermon to be preached a few days later in this very chancel—on Valentine’s Day. With nowhere to go, I filled my favorite mug with coffee and settled in, to write a sermon on...what else...love. And I read again my favorite Bible passage...

For this reason I bow my knees before God, the Creator, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of God’s glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God’s Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

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Ours is a God of love—of that no one can deny. Jesus, God Incarnate shows us the way, the truth and the life. And each week we gather together, and we remind one another—of the fullness of God.

