

THE RATIONALE FOR ATONEMENT THROUGH CHRIST

Virgil Warren, PhD

Introduction

Summary statement: *“Christ alone has achieved perfect goodness as a man in the flesh by obeying the Father in everything even to the point of yielding to an agonizing death. When we commit ourselves to Christ as Lord together with the values and purposes he shares with the Father, God considers us righteous like him, forgiving our sin, reckoning aspiration for achievement, reconciling us to himself.”*

Salvation as reconciliation to God (2 Corinthians 5:18-21). Salvation through Christ taps into our understanding from experience how restoring broken friendships works and why it behooves us to avail ourselves of its benefits with God and other people (Matthew 5:23-24). Reconciliation between us and God operates the same way it does between us. God is a person, the One who gave us the interpersonal capacity by putting his image in us (Genesis 1:26-27). Salvation means reconciliation between us and him. The remaining point is to honor Christ for his atoning role in that framework.

Salvation in three parts

What the Son did

The Son entered the world by birth as a man (incarnation), sent by the Father to live sinlessly in the flesh to the point of violent death, thereby establishing himself as the One the Father could appoint as the basis for reconciliation. THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE SON

What we do

As the Father’s condition for reconciliation to himself, we identify with the Son by committing totally, permanently, and exclusively to his lordship, purposes, and values he shares with the Father. OUR IDENTIFICATION WITH THE SON

What the Father will do

The Father will consider us righteous like the Son we commit ourselves to (forgiveness), reconciling us to himself (gift of the Spirit), and counting us among all others so reconciled (church membership). RECONCILIATION BY THE FATHER

I. Overview of the Atonement

A: ACT

B: CONSEQUENCE

The Father sent the Son into the world^{A1}

The Son becomes physical from birth to agonizing

as a physical man to live the full range of human experience.^{A2}

death as the ultimate extent of obedience to the Father, the ultimate level of human righteousness.^{B1}

The Son lived sinlessly^{A3} in the physical world as a man like we are called on to do.

The sinless Son becomes sinless as a man in our realm, having suffered to the point we may have to and thereby qualifying himself to be the object of our identification.

The Father appointed the Son^{A4} as the one we identify-with/commit-ourselves-to—which equals commitment to the Father.^{A5}

The Son became the appointed object of identification for us to commit ourselves to.^{B2}

We commit ourselves to him, his values, and purposes.^{A6}

We become identified with him in the Father's mind.

The Father considers us like the Son we have identified with and committed ourselves to.

By the Father we become considered righteous like the One we have identified ourselves with and committed ourselves to.

We continue our commitment to the righteous Son, his values, and purposes.^{A7}

We become continually considered righteous like the Son by the Father.^{B3}

Scripture Bases for the Rationale

A1 The Father Sent the Son

"God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it through him" (John 3:17; cp. 3:24, 36-38; 6:29, 38, 57; 7:28-29; 8:42; 10:36; 11:42; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21).

"You sent me into the world" (John 17:18).

A2 Reason for the incarnation of the Son

Hebrews 2:9-18: *"Wherefore it behooved him to be made like his brothers, that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people."*¹⁸ *For in that he himself has suffered being tempted, he can help those who are tempted."*

Hence, appropriateness because the ones he came to save are flesh-and-blood persons

*A3 The Sinlessness of the Son

“We have a high priest . . . that has been tempted in every way like we are, yet without sinning” (Hebrews 4:15).

“Him who knew no sin . . . ” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

“Such a high priest was appropriate for us, one that was holy, blameless, separated from sinners . . . who did not daily . . . need to offer sacrifices . . . for his own sin” (Hebrews 7:26-27).

“Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps, who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth” (1 Peter 2:21-22).

“There is no sin in him” (1 John 3:5).

“Which of you can convict me of sin” (John 8:46)?

“You denied the holy and righteous One” (Acts 3:14).

The Son’s Sinlessness in the Flesh

The passages that speak of the Son’s sinlessness combine it with his being sinless in the physical realm (Hebrews 2:9-18).

“ . . . learned obedience by the things he suffered” (Hebrews 5:4-9; 7:15).

A4 The Appointment of the Son as Savior

“He was faithful to the One that appointed him” (Hebrews 3:2).

“ . . . named by God a high priest” (Psalm 110:4 < Hebrew 5:6, 10; 7:17, 20-21, 28).

“No other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

No other name could be appointed because all others have sinned (Romans 3:23).

Hence, salvation through him is not inherent consequence or automatic result, but because the Father willed it so. Of course, no one but the Messiah has thus qualified himself to be appointed.

A5 The unity of the Father and Son

“I and the Father are united” (John 10:30). See also John 10:38; 14:10, 11, 20; 17:11, 20-23.

The difference is that the Son established his righteousness in the flesh, which makes him all the more the One we have been appropriately called on to commit ourselves to.

B1 He *“emptied himself” (kenosis)* of his rights and privileges as deity in becoming a human being (Philippians 2:8).

B2 Since he established his righteousness by suffering in the flesh, we can more easily see him helpful to us as a merciful and faithful high priest touched with the feelings of our infirmities (Hebrews 2:17-18; 4:15; 5:2).

A6 Our Identification with the Son

Acts 2:38: “Repent, and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ unto remission of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Matthew 28:19: “Make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you.” Identifying with the Son as committing to him, his values, and purposes amounts to identifying with the Father because they have the same values and purposes. The difference between them is that the Son maintained his values and purposes in the flesh against ultimate physical agony as temptation for him to depart from them.

Galatians 3:27: “As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Cp. Romans 6:1-5.

Our responses do not cause the resulting relationship in whole or in part—as Esau’s repentance shows: “he found no place for a change of mind in his father though he sought it diligently with tears” (Hebrews 12:17). It is only because God so appointed that any of our responses have any value in our receiving “life”: as something having that value, God made repentance available to Israel (Acts 5:31) and to Gentiles (Acts 11:18). The things God appoints as conditions are appropriate to the forgiveness he offers.

A7 Continued Relationship to Christ

“The blood of Jesus his Son continues to cleanse us from all sin” (1 John 1:7-9).

Hence, the manner of initial salvation is likewise the manner of continued relationship to God: interpersonal.

B3 God continues to view us as righteous like the One we continue to commit ourselves to.

II. The Reconciliation Process: Repentance Plus Forgiveness

Salvation is reconciliation as these texts show: Romans 5:10-11; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 (“*ministry of reconciliation*”); Ephesians 2:14-18; Colossians 1:20-22; Hebrews 2:17 as well as the references about “*friendship with God*”: 2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8; (John 15:15); James, 2:23.

Reconciliation requires regaining goodness in the eyes of God by getting rid of the guilt from behaviors that bring alienation.

Reconciliation involves repentance by the offender plus forgiveness by the offended. The offender’s repentance separates him from the kind of person he was when he offended; the offended person’s forgiveness separates the offender from the kind of person he was when he offended.

The reconciliation occurs in the minds of the persons reconciling because the past sin itself cannot be changed, but that is not the issue. The issue is how the persons view each other and relate in the present.

Repentance by the offender and forgiveness by the offended applies in all cases of reconciliation between people or between people and God. The two acts separate the present person from the past sin that caused the separation.

Repentance	+	Forgiveness	=	Reconciliation
US (condition)		OTHER (cause)		(result)
We separate ourselves from our past sin against the purposes and values we share the Other.		The other separates us from our past sin against the purposes and values we share.		“saved” from alienation

III. Christ's Atonement in That Reconciliation Framework

(a) Christ's atonement stands inside of salvation as reconciliation, (b) which is a trust system operating inside interpersonal reality (c) motivated by the Other's love, (d) which, in turn, engenders our love and trust in him. It consists of trusting that (1) identifying with Christ has the value God assigned to it and that (2) God forgives without rebuking for asking (James 1:5)

Repentance	+	Forgiveness	=	Reconciliation
US (condition)		FATHER (cause)		(result)
We separate ourselves from our past sins against the purposes and values we are to share with God.		The Other separates us from our past sins against purposes and values we Share with God.		“saved” from alienation = friendship
[negative side]				
. . . . based on . . .				

IDENTITY WITH CHRIST by
 associating ourselves with him,
 committing ourselves to him,
 our aspiration reckoned for achievement
 [positive side]
 . . . based on . . .

ULTIMATE RIGHTEOUSNESS ESTABLISHED
 BY THE SON
 incarnate sinlessness carried voluntarily
 to the point of suffering death from persecution
 . . . as foreshadowed by . . .

THE MOSAIC SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM

IV. Aligning the Terminology with the Reality

The layout above analyzes the reality that makes reconciliation clear and sensible. The comments below make statements about reconciliation straightforward. Scripture often expresses these matters in shorthand expressions and figures of speech—metaphors, analogies, oxymorons, paradoxes, phenomenological statements (the way it looks), idioms, poetic expressions, symbolism. Without the reality alongside, these ways of speaking may not communicate to those who do not already understand, especially in modern western culture that tends to speak in more straightforward ways.

Figurative presentation lends color, interest, and affective nuances and creates a “sense” of the meaning without necessarily providing a clear picture of it. Poetic speech can be more efficient; speaking literally can take longer to express the point—as a reader can verify when explaining the complex ideas literally. (See sample texts explained below.) Speaking more literally may lose that engaging coloration, but it aids understanding. It can help avoid “*getting lost in the words*” by using “reality thinking.” Such thought concentrates on actions and involves the interpersonal character of the Christian worldview and purposes.

(1) Aspects and terms (“metaphors of salvation”) about the full reality

Absolution, adoption, atonement, cleansing, conquest, conversion, creation, discipleship, election, eternal life, expiation, fellowship, forgiveness, illumination, imputation, indwelling, justification, obedience, predestination/foreordination, propitiation, ransom, reconciliation, redemption, regeneration, remission, sacrifice, salvation, sanctification, submission

(2) Atonement elements involved in laying the foundation for reconciliation: blood, death, crucifixion, sacrifice

Death means that Christ did not just live as a man among people for a while and then return to the Father after, say, his teaching ministry. Rather, in his *righteousness* he endured ultimate human suffering in *obedience* to the Father (interpersonal cause). Note Romans 5:8, 10; 14:9; 1 Corinthians 8:11; 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:14; 6:15

Blood connects with atonement, not as its agent (impersonal cause), but as an indication that Christ did not die from old age, sickness, poison, accident, or disease, but by execution by people that hated him. Passages include Matthew 26:28 (cp. Mark 14:24; John 22:20; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:25, 27); Acts 20:28; Romans 3:25; 5:9-11; Galatians 1:14, 20; Ephesians 1:7; 2:13; Colossians 1:14, 20; Hebrews 9:12-14, 20-25; 10:19, 29; 12:24; 13:12, 20, 21; 1 Peter 1:2, 19; 1 John 1:7; 5:8; Revelation 1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11.

Crucifixion was the way as an innocent man he voluntarily (Matthew 26:51-53; John 10:18; 15:13; 18:5-11) submitted to an agonizing death used for *punishment* of criminals, something even more than dying on the battlefield (Romans 5:8; Hebrews 9:12).

The Mosaic blood sacrifices foreshadowed Messiah's dying on account of the sins of others and for the sins of others. The paschal lamb most explicitly looked forward to the Messiah in the stipulation that not to break any of its bones at Passover, the event at which Jesus was "sacrificed" (Exodus 12:46; Numbers 9:12; Psalm 22:17; 34:20 < John 19:36; cp. John 1:29; 1 John 3:5).

(3) Imagery for the atonement includes cleansing, washing, healing, curing, as well as saving (Romans 8:24; 1 Corinthians 1:30)

Approximate pictures for Christ's work in reconciliation

Conquest/Victor over sin and death: Romans 4:22-25

Ransom: Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:6

Purchase/redemption: 1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23; Ephesians 1:7, 14; Colossians 1:14; Hebrews 9:12, 15; 2 Peter 2:1; Revelation 5:9; 14:3-4;

Substitution/sacrifice: Isaiah 53

**A common element makes these pictures appropriate: a result freely provided by another for someone in need who cannot contribute to that result in a causal sense.

(4) Reality thinking applied to a sampling of atonement passages

"The Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29, 36; Acts 8:32; 1 Peter 1:19; Revelation 5:6, 8, 12-13; 6:1 < Isaiah 53:32). Christ carried out ultimate righteousness by submitting to death on a cross. God counts us righteous if we commit ourselves to Christ, his lordship, values, and purposes. Considering us righteous is the positive side of forgiving our sins. Christ takes away sin by making righteousness through forgiveness available to those who identify with him.

"He that believes on the Son has eternal life" (John 3:36). In itself, believing on the crucified Christ no more makes people righteous than looking at a brazen serpent cures snakebite. In both cases, the actions are not causes but appropriate conditions God specified for his forgiving sin or curing snakebite. The text presents them as parallel. The point is conditionality, not causality. God inserts his forgiveness between our trust in Christ and our receiving eternal life from God. (Conditions can be called "occasional causes.")

"You have been bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:20; cp. 7:23; 2 Peter 2:1) as if buying the freedom of a slave. That image is an approximate comparison because there is no one to pay the price to.

"He who knew no sin [God] made to be sin on our behalf" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Note the expression *"make God a liar"* (1 John 1:10; 5:10; Matthew 5:32; 17:12). The Father allowed Christ to be *"treated like a sinner"* because in so doing Christ became sinless in the highest degree—voluntary suffering to the point of violent death in obedience to the Father. Having endured ultimate suffering in the flesh, he established ultimate righteousness in our fleshly realm.

He became the righteous One in the flesh whom the Father could appoint for us to commit ourselves to in order for the Father to consider us righteous like him.

“Christ became a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13). *“The curse of the Law”* arises from the comment that *“everyone is accursed that dies on a tree”* (Deuteronomy 21:23). Christ died on a “tree”/cross so we can avoid dying as a curse for our sins. The dying was not a *punishment* on him for our sin; it was a *suffering* he underwent to establish the perfect righteousness we could commit ourselves to and thereby “receive” forgiveness by being viewed as righteous like him. It is a righteousness God considers us as having because we commit ourselves to him who has that righteousness.

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15). He came into the world because those who need salvation are flesh and blood people. It was appropriate that Christ live out his righteousness in the weaknesses and temptations present in the realm where we people fail to live it out. He could then be the One we could most appropriately commit ourselves to for the Father’s considering us righteous like the One we indicate we want to be like and considered as like.

“Christ bore our sins on the cross” (Hebrews 9:28; 1 Peter 2:24). By obeying the Father to the point of that agonizing death, Christ established himself in the flesh as the One we can commit to, so that the Father views us as righteous like him as the Father promised. Coming to view us as righteous (positive) amounts to the same thing as forgiving our sins (negative) in terms of Christ’s righteousness that we commit to. He was treated like the criminal he was not so we could be treated like innocent people we are not. If we had not sinned, there would have been no need for him to endure the cross to establish an example of real righteousness in the flesh for us to identify with. He bore our sins in the sense that he died because we had sinned, not as a substitute criminal, but as the righteous object we commit ourselves to for reconciliation to God. Sinfulness and righteousness are moral qualities that cannot by nature be transferred from one person to another: *“The righteousness of the righteous will be on himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be on himself”* (Ezekiel 18:20).

“They had washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14). Robes represent what covers the saints, what characterizes them; and the symbolism unfolds from there. “Washing” does not clean off sins; washing robes in blood would not make them white anyway; white represents purity. That comes about really by purification from sin by the Father’s forgiveness conditioned on our commitment to the sinless One who shed his blood in maintaining his sinlessness.

Isaiah 53 is the beautiful *Suffering Servant Poem*, which incorporates several expressions that New Testament writers pick up on in referring to Messiah’s atonement.

53:4-5, 11: To observers it looked like God had struck him for his iniquities (phenomenology), but he was struck for ours. But more than that, he was not smitten in *punishment* for ours, but in *completing his obedience* for us to commit to. When we commit ourselves to the One who perfectly obeyed the Father, God considers us like him in intent and forgives our sin

accordingly. Committing to Christ and his righteousness is the same thing as repentance from our unrighteousness.

53:5: “*With his stripes we are healed.*” The statement is an oxymoron because stripes do not heal; if anything, they make wounds worse. He experienced stripes as an innocent man in establishing the highest degree of innocence possible. On the condition of our identifying with the Servant, God forgives our sins, which Isaiah calls “healing” us from them.

53:6: “*God laid on him the iniquities of us all.*” The sentence traces back to the practice of laying the hands of the sinner on the head of the sacrificial animal (Leviticus 16:21-22; Numbers 8:12). It was a symbolic gesture that pictured transferring the worshiper’s sins onto the animal sacrificed in his place. But that sacrificial background is symbolic for ridding from sin, not real, because in the first place (1) “*the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin*” (Psalm 40:6 < Hebrews 10:1, 4, 11; cp. 9:9; Romans 8:3). Furthermore, (2) neither guilt nor punishment for it can be transferred from one person to another (Deuteronomy 24:16; 2 Kings 14:6; 2 Chronicles 25:4; Jeremiah 31:29-30; Ezekiel 18:4, 20; Micah 6:6-8). Guilt is as personal as the act that produces it. So transfer is symbolic. The reality behind this symbolism is that the ultimate righteousness in the flesh was established in the Servant’s obedience to the point of agonized suffering unto the death that Isaiah describes. God has willed for “us all” to commit ourselves to the Righteous One, his lordship, values, and purposes as God’s condition considering us righteous like the Suffering Servant.

53:7: “*The Lamb did not open its mouth*” is a picture of innocence, a lamb unaware of what’s to happen, not objecting to it or trying to get away.

V. Postscript on Alternative Explanations

Christ’s atonement does not come through magic or miracle (impersonal mechanisms), transfer of guilt or goodness (legal transaction), influence or example (human achievement), or legal pronouncement (by third parties). Commitment to the Son, his lordship, values, and purposes equals commitment to the Father (Matthew 28:19) because they share the same purposes and values, and because the Son came to do the will of the Father who sent him to establish perfect righteousness in human realm. “*God loved the world so much that he gave his Son so people who put their trust in him can have eternal fellowship with God*” (John 3:16; Romans 5:8-11).