

The Church of the Servant King Soteriology Series

SO_5_What Christ Accomplished in His Death-Part 7 – Some Distortions

Introduction, Definition & Description

Immediately after Christ's death, Satanically inspired distortions of the Truth began to manifest themselves through the writing and teaching of depraved men. We see the first example of this attempt at deception recorded in Matthew 28:11-15 where the guards are bribed to lie about Jesus' resurrection. Of course, if Satan could disprove the resurrection, the basis of our hope would be demolished. The resurrection became a central focal point of the apostles' teaching to the Jews and eventually the Gentiles as recorded by Luke in the book of Acts (e.g. Acts 2:24, 30; 3:15, etc.). Later, in the Church Age other heretical distortions of the Truth began to emerge consistent with Satan's strategy in the Angelic Conflict. The purpose of this lesson is to briefly introduce just a few examples of those distortions.

Distortions of the Meaning of the "Atonement"

In the last lesson, we distinguished between the doctrine of expiation and atonement. In order to accommodate to the common usage and meaning of atonement, I'll refer to the following views as distortions of Truth concerning the atonement.

Ransom to Satan Theory

This is a theory first advanced by Origen (ca. 185-254) that viewed Christ's death as a ransom paid to Satan to purchase man who was held captive to Satan's claims. Supporters of this view cite such passages as Matthew 20:28 and 1 Corinthians 6:20 as support for their view. The problem with this view is that it sees Christ's death as a payment to Satan and makes Satan the sovereign one. This view is a distortion of the correct understanding of the doctrine of redemption.

Recapitulation Theory

This is a theory advanced by Irenaeus (ca. 130 – 200) which understood Jesus' death as a victory over everything lost in the fall of the first Adam. In other words, Christ recapitulated (or recuperated) the effects of the fall of Adam and in so doing He reversed the course of events initiated by Adam. Supporters of this view cite Romans 5:15-21 and Hebrews 2:10 as support for their view. The problem with this view is that it fails to recognize that the believer still has a sinful nature. This view is a distortion of the doctrines of reconciliation and positional sanctification.

Dramatic Theory

This is a theory advanced by the Lutheran Bishop Gustaf Aulen (d. 1977) in which Christ is seen as the victor in a dramatic and divine conflict of good and evil. The result is that man is released from the bondage of Satan by Christ's victory. Scripture often cited includes Matthew 20:28 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-57. The problem with this view is that it falls short of explaining the full extent and effect of Christ's death. It fails to explain and fully reconcile such doctrines as positional sanctification and the sinful nature of man (particularly believers).

Martyrdom Theory

This theory is a consistent theme in the views of such groups as the Ebionites (only accepted Jesus as a prophet and not God) and men as Ritschl, Schweitzer, and Bultmann. According to this view, the meaning of the Cross is that Christ demonstrated faithfulness and

integrity to his principles of truth. This view rejects the deity of Christ and it distorts or ignores the concepts underlying the doctrines of propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption to name a few.

Satisfaction Theory (a.k.a. Commercial Theory)

This is a theory that was based upon the assumption that it was God's honor that needed payment or satisfaction. It was developed by Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109). God was viewed as requiring payment or compensation for damages done. Sin was viewed as any failure to subject oneself to God, thereby shaming God and robbing Him of His rightful veneration and dignity. The emphasis of this model is social and godward. It is based upon such passages as John 10:18. This view provided fodder for the Roman Catholic systematization of penance and merits. This view is a distortion of the doctrine of propitiation.

Moral Influence Theory

This theory was advanced by Peter Abelard (d. 1142) and viewed Christ's death as the revelation of the love of God. Christ suffered because of the sins of mankind. It is based upon such passages as Romans 5:8; 2 Corinthians 5:17, 19; Philippians 2:5-11; and Colossians 3:24. This theory is not so much untrue as it is deficient. It is true that the Cross was a demonstration of the love of God; however, such a focus upon the love of God seems to ignore His righteousness that needed to be propitiated.

Governmental Theory

This theory was developed in reaction to the Luther and Reformation based concept of substitutionary atonement. The Governmental theory represented the Arminian reaction and was formulated by Hugo Grotius (d. 1645), a student of Jacobus Arminius. As ruler over a moral government, Christ's death demonstrates God's high regard for His law. It shows God's attitude toward sin. Because of Christ's death, God now has the legal evidence to forgive the sins of those who repent and accept Christ's substitutionary death. This view was based in part on a distorted interpretation of such passages as Psalm 2, 5; and Isaiah 42:21. The problem with this view is that in an attempt to defend the concept of unlimited atonement, the Arminian denied the valid concept of substitution. Also, the view blurred (if not obliterated) the concept of propitiation (satisfaction of God's righteousness).

Universal Reconciliation Theory

This is the view that Christ's death on the cross is effective for all. It is a view that is embraced by universalists as well as some more mainstream groups. This view seems to underlie the positions of such theologians as Karl Barth and many in the World Council of Churches. It is also prominent in Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. This view results form a distorted understanding of passages that teach that Christ died for all (Jn 11:50-52; Rom 5:8-9). As such, it distorts the doctrines of unlimited atonement and a correct understanding of the essence of God.