

Living the Essentials of the Faith: Everywhere, Everyone, At All Times
RAISE – Revelation, Anthropology, Incarnation, Sanctification, Eternity
Incarnation Part 2 –Is the cross the only way?

Key Concept: Reconciliation between God and humanity is only possible through the death and resurrection of the Incarnate God-man, Jesus.

Summary: In the person of Jesus, God provided the only possible solution for the problem of human sin. Because Jesus was fully human, it was appropriate that the effort and work of reconciliation, the payment of our human debt of sin, should be made by Him. And because Jesus was fully God, He Himself was of infinite worth; He possessed the means to repay the debt that humans incurred. St. Anselm, in discussing the means of atonement, or reconciliation, between God and humankind, says the following:

“For God will not do it, because he has no debt to pay; and man will not do it, because he cannot. Therefore, in order that the God-man may perform this, it is necessary that the same being should be perfect God and perfect man, in order to make this atonement. For he cannot and ought not to do it, unless he be very God and very man.”

Throughout the witness of the Old Testament, God’s special revelation to Israel, two concepts regarding sin and atonement are reinforced. The first is that sin, which leads to separation from God and death, can be paid for by the death of a substitute; in the Old Testament, this substitutionary atonement occurred through the sacrifice of animals. The second is that these animal sacrifices were insufficient because they needed to be offered incessantly; their very repetition revealed that they could not fully resolve the problem of sin. A more perfect sacrifice, a more perfect substitute, was needed.

Jesus, being fully God and fully man, became, on the cross, the sufficient sacrifice for humanity’s sin. His infinite worth makes future atonement unnecessary. Christians affirm that on the cross, all the sin of all of humanity was imputed, or transferred, upon Jesus, who Himself was without sin. Likewise, when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, His righteousness is imputed upon us. Thus by uniting ourselves to Christ through faith, our sins are paid and we are reconciled to God. This understanding of substitutionary atonement is essential to our Christian life.

We have a second understanding of atonement that is equally important, named the Christus Victor theory. In short, it affirms that Jesus’ death on the cross was part of a cosmic battle between the forces of God and Satan. The death and resurrection of Jesus – particularly the resurrection – was the final blow that forever broke the power of evil and death in the world. Thus through the death of Jesus we see a payment of our sin; through His resurrection we see His victory over the forces of sin and darkness.

The centrality of the death and resurrection of Jesus in the work of reconciliation between God and mortals is the core of the entire Christian faith. It is the gospel, the good news, for the entire world. There is no way back to a relationship with God outside of that path offered by the gospel. To suggest that salvation is possible apart from faith in Jesus is to reject the divinity and saving work of our Lord and Savior.