

WHAT BACKGROUND FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO CONSTRUCTING
THE DOCTRINE OF ATONEMENT?

A Discussion Board Answer

Submitted to

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- ‡ The Paradox: Man's sin compels God to voluntarily justify the sinner.
- ‡ The Problem: How is Jesus qualified to accomplish this for man and still remain God?
- ‡ The Solution: The indivisible triune God, in spirit and body, satisfies and fulfills Old Testament law and prophecy—in the perfect Lamb that was slain for the sins of the whole world (1 Jn 2:2).

First, I apologize for what may *seem* like impertinence directed toward scholarly authority in my study of God's Word. But I have spoken this question *out loud*—over and over. It corresponds to teaching introduced on pages 818-19 in Erickson's *Christian Theology*. An objective of chapter 39 is "to recall five background factors of the atonement and show how they influence *a view* of the atonement." Let me first comment on *what* I'm asked to consider.

I have gone to great lengths to train myself in my speaking and writing to try to limit my words—as much as possible—to *the words of the Bible*—in order to teach and defend the Bible. Yet, I find it is common to read *scholarly* work that attempts to "construct" this, that or the other. My observation is that since we operate *external* to the Word—and cannot legitimately construct anything regarding it—we can only receive and respect or else we reject and betray holy revelation. A constructivist or scientific approach to God's truth, I humbly submit, is not what the Father intends for His children. Further, we know from Erickson's chapter 39 that scientifically oriented men do continue to posit *various* views of the atonement. According to revelation there is only God's pure and *achieved intention* in *His* use of atonement. Careful reading of His Word rules out all other views except *His*.

But alas, with sufficient exposure in seminary, I've discovered I am often at odds with certain scholarly perspectives. So, as I continue to prepare to stand before the Bema, I pray my detailed and specific 2 Tim 2:15 handling of divine writ will be rewarded for *even how I pose* the questions I acknowledge must be asked. Having said that, I agree we certainly need to know *the*

atonement's *context*. So by stating *the* atonement —rather than “a *view* of the atonement” —I indicate Christ's final atonement is unique in its enduring purpose and effect. This is its only valid context. I conclude. We must use caution if we think we can ‘construct’ anything regarding this or any other divine truth. I now proceed with my answer to the question.

Initially, Erickson summarizes —but does not identify as *causal* —the *need for the atonement* —that being Christ's perfect holiness. “...Sin is repulsive to Him...He cannot look upon it.”¹ Erickson does not list or refer to any of the attributes of God and their supporting Scriptures that he first lists in chapters 13-15. But *inferred* by chapter 39's entry, “the Nature of God” is the *implied* need for *reconciliation* if God is going to be able to *justifiably* relate to creatures who no longer operate in their created purity. Reconciliation is a biblical word needed for legitimate discussion of atonement. I believe we should *major* on use of *biblical words*.

Next, Erickson steers the reader away from Kantian and Schleiermacher-oriented views of the *status* of God's perfect law. Erickson states that “...the law is something of a transcript of the nature of God”² —that it is God Himself we *offend* when we offend His law. Necessarily, this increases the *need* for Christ's atonement because man's violation of God's law stores up wrath for man in the day of wrath —as well as it reveals the righteous judgment of God (Rom 2:5).³ We must grant “there is a definite link between sin and liability —to punishment”⁴ (Gen 2:15-17; Ezek 18:20; Rom 6:23; Gal 6:8). God must uphold the integrity of His holy law.

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology, Second Edition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), 820.

² Ibid. An interesting use of figurative speech, I accept transcript *points to* the greater theological truth.

³ Preparing to answer this question brought up a new question to add to my *in exhaustive* list. I see there is extensive discussion whether Rom 2:5 refers only to the crucifixion or also to tribulation judgment —and further, whether that judgment is deemed satisfied in AD 70. I, of course, do not see Preterism as supported by revelation.

⁴ *Christian Theology, Second Edition*, 821, *em dash* added.

As a sub point of the *status* of the law, the human condition reflects the *result* of man's violation of God's law and it's affront to His nature. But I believe the best axiomatic statement I've read on this is Pentecost's "...man is as bad *off* as he can be."⁵ I find this avoids the ornate—tending toward erroneous flowering—in the idea of the wilting TULIP label, *total depravity*.

Coming closer to the heart of factors essential in this discussion, Erickson states, "The death of an ordinary human could scarcely have sufficient value to cover his or her own sins, let alone those of the whole race." Of prime significance in Erickson's list of background factors is his statement: "In [voluntarily] dying [Christ] did something God would never *have* to do. Sinless Himself, there was no need for atonement on His *own* behalf."⁶ (Erickson's statements are *essential* doctrinal points if we are to understand Soteriology.) But I say our *emphasis* must begin with the clear *distinction* Erickson makes between the Son and the Father—as discussed both in Theology proper and Christology.⁷ In the context of this background factor of Christ's nature, Erickson's words are the proof of the *humanity* of Christ—that *ecce homo*, Jesus—died for other men. It was not divinity that died at Calvary.⁸ Yet, knowing Christ is *one* Person, *how can this be? Indeed.* We must allow the Word—the *logos*—to explain the Word—Christ. The

⁵ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things Which Become Sound Doctrine: Doctrinal studies of Fourteen Crucial Words of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1965), 10.

⁶ *Christian Theology, Second Edition*, 822, emphasis added. It is interesting to contemplate the critical importance of these facts—repeated by Erickson more than once throughout his thorough tome. In his statements we have a refutation not only of Latter Day Saint "blood atonement," but also correction of the perhaps well-intended but blasphemous bumper sticker, "Only two defining forces have ever died for you: Jesus Christ who died for your soul and the Revolutionary soldier who died for your freedom." (Designation of which soldier varies; sometimes the bumper sticker indicates a more recent conflict.) Both errors—useless self-sacrifice and misuse of military sacrifice—are trending in pop culture as evolving means we must consider in rectifying man's plight.

⁷ Erickson does make that distinction by virtue of his exact words. In this course I have been educated to many of the subtleties and complexities of trying to *hold in one thought* the reality of the Trinity. We know Erickson affirms this unity of the Father and the Son. Erickson does not contradict himself though. His words move us to further study of the mystery that is the foundation of our faith compared to all other faiths and belief systems.

⁸ "When Jesus died on the cross, it was not his divine nature as God that died. It was the human nature that died. Dying is a biological function that was reserved only for the human nature of Christ when he died on the cross." <http://carm.org/how-jesus-god-die>.

hypostatic union of Christ is certainly an enigma we could spend our lifetime to even begin to comprehend. We are charged to use words that do not violate our holding *trinity* in *one* thought.

Finally, we come to the place I believe we can all stand on sure ground —where all of the body of Christ can understand and cite Scripture to support their understanding of His perfect atonement. “While the legal portions of the OT typify...the sacrificial and substitutionary character of Christ’s death, the prophetic passages go even further. They establish the connection between the OT sacrifices and Christ’s death. Isaiah 53 is the clearest of all.⁹ All believers need to understand the background factor of Christ’s death having satisfied High Priest specifications detailed in Lev 1:3-4. “...let him [the High Priest] offer a male without blemish: he shall offer it of *his own voluntary will* at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation before the LORD. And he shall put his hand upon the head of the burnt offering; and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.” Ultimately, it is Aaronic *reference* (Book of Hebrews, chapters 5, 7, and 9) as well as Christ’s voluntary Aaronic *obedience*¹⁰ that must frame our understanding of His sacrifice *two thousand years ago* —and *that* sacrifice based on the requirements of the law given at least *1,400 years before His death*. Surely, we must accept that we cannot apprehend and appropriate Christ’s atonement according to our limited grasp of time. And “background factors” in this question mean far more than we are able to “construct.” The true background of our High Priest’s sacrifice on our behalf extends to eternity past. The entire events we identify on Resurrection Sunday are hidden in the foreknowledge of the One who would experience that resurrection —*after* He created time —and *after* interjecting Himself *in* time. What a mighty God we serve!

⁹ *Christian Theology, Second Edition, 823.*

¹⁰ The Book of Hebrews primarily and summarily reveals that which teaches Christ’s obedience to the law.