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## Oliver D. Crisp, APPROACHING THE ATONEMENT: THE RECONCILING WORK OF CHRIST

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appeasement before being willing to love" (214). A striking implication of an open and relational theology is that God cannot guarantee salvation even after Jesus's death on the cross. The author remains somewhat unspecific here; I interpret the implications of his theory as such: The apostles could have run away for good. It was possible that no one cared about the gospel after Jesus's death. The existence of the church is rooted in but not necessitated by the cross, not even by the resurrection (217). God could only hope that the cross be effective (216) and a church be established (218–223). These are, in my opinion, necessary consequences of open theism—and necessary implications of a God who trusts—which need to be either acknowledged or at least actively disputed by those defending this model of God.

Holtzen's book is a very important addition to previous academic work on open theism. He fills two rather significant gaps that had been overlooked or avoided by most other authors: First, it is emphasized that a loving, risk-taking God must be a God who *believes in* and *trusts* His creatures, not only the other way. Second, the implications of a libertarian anthropology are extended to the freedom of Christ and the freedom of his early followers. As a consequence, in an open theology, God could neither guarantee that Christ would take up the cross nor that a church would be established. Possibly, and here more theological research must be done, God could not even guarantee that the requirements for an incarnation and thus for salvation would be met at a certain time in history. He could only hope for and—maybe—increase the probability of salvation and all its freedom-depending requirements to occur.

*Approaching the Atonement: The Reconciling Work of Christ*, by Oliver D. Crisp. InterVarsity Press, 2020. Pp. x + 198. \$22.00 (paperback).

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In this review of Oliver Crisp's *Approaching the Atonement: The Reconciling Work of Christ*, I first provide a summary of the most important goals of each chapter. I will utilize more space summarizing and engaging with elements of Crisp's discussion that set it apart from most other introductory books on the atonement. I will then explain why I believe Crisp's book to be an excellent introduction to the theology of atonement. I conclude by identifying some things that are absent from the book that those who are searching for an introduction to the atonement might have wanted to see included.



In chapter 1, Crisp aims to set the stage of the book, and the most important bit of stage-setting is the clarification of what he means by a “doctrine of the atonement.” A doctrine of the atonement is a doctrine about the way in which Jesus’s work—that is, his life, ministry, and crucifixion—helps to repair the broken relationship that exists between God and humans as a result of human sin. And a “doctrine,” says Crisp, should be understood as a kind of “model” in the sense used in the natural sciences. Crisp explains:

In the contemporary natural sciences, a model is a simplified account of complex data that is not the sober truth of the matter, but which is an approximation to the truth, such as the model of light functioning as waves, or the familiar pictorial model of an atom one finds in high school physics textbooks. Atonement doctrines may be thought of as models in this sense. They are approximations to the truth of the matter, attempts to represent in a simplified form something of the complexity of the saving work of Christ (25).

So, the doctrines of atonement that Crisp presents in this book are conceived of as attempts to state the approximate truth about how Christ reconciles humans to God. Thinking of doctrines of atonement as models allows us both to accommodate the thought that the atonement is in some sense a “mystery” that is “beyond our comprehension,” while also allowing us to avoid having to say, along with some recent theologians, that doctrines of atonement are ultimately mere metaphors (24, 26).

Chapter 2 is an introduction to theological reflection on the atonement from the age of the early church fathers. Crisp decides against giving a superficial summary of the thought of many thinkers from this period, and instead focuses on providing accounts of the views of two major theologians, Irenaeus and Athanasius.

Chapter 3 introduces the ransom doctrine of the atonement. First, Crisp helpfully distinguishes between “the ransom motif” and “Christus Victor,” two terms that are frequently “used as synonyms in the atonement literature” (49). He illustrates the distinction by briefly presenting the views of two recent theologians who distinguish between these two ideas and prioritize one of them: J. Denny Weaver and Hans Boersma. Second, Crisp presents the basic idea of the ransom doctrine and searches for a way to spell out the details in a sufficiently clear way for the view to count as a “complete doctrine of atonement.” He finds no such way, concluding that this approach to the atonement as it is traditionally presented is only “a figure of speech, a motif of a sort” (55). Finally, Crisp proposes an interesting “amended account of ransom” that draws inspiration from some ideas of Irenaeus and Athanasius presented in the previous chapter and that does count as a full-blown doctrine of the atonement.

Chapter 4 offers a clear explanation of Anselm’s satisfaction doctrine of the atonement, as Anselm presents it in *Cur Deus Homo*.

In chapter 5, Crisp presents moral exemplarism. He introduces the concept of a “mere moral exemplar account,” which is an “account of Christ’s reconciling work that reduces it to his role as a moral example” (80). Crisp

dispels the misconception that Peter Abelard was a proponent of a mere moral exemplar account and then presents the views of Faustus Socinus and John Hick as examples of this approach to atonement.

Chapter 6 introduces the doctrine of penal substitution. A helpful distinction is drawn between two versions of this approach: those that hold that Jesus reconciles humans with God by literally being punished, and those that hold that Jesus merely takes upon himself the “penal consequences” of our sins, enduring the harsh treatment that would have been our punishment had we received the punishment that we deserved (97). This chapter is unusual in that it does not focus on presenting the views of any particular penal substitution theorists, and the majority of it is devoted to discussing objections to this atonement doctrine.

Chapter 7 introduces the governmental and vicarious penitence doctrines of atonement—two fascinating doctrines that are less likely to appear in introductory books on the atonement. The governmental doctrine, whose historical champion is Hugo Grotius, holds that a crucial concept for understanding the atonement is that of “rectoral justice,” which is “that aspect of [God’s] justice that has to do with the moral governance of the world” (118). The requirements of rectoral justice permit God, the “moral governor” of the universe, to refrain from punishing humans for their sin, but only if “there is some appropriate act performed by Christ that has a deterrent effect upon fallen human beings” (118). That appropriate act was Christ’s acceptance of death on the cross, which involved Christ undergoing harsh treatment of the sort that we deserve because of our sins. Since Christ became our “penal example,” God is allowed to “relax the need to visit retribution upon” humans and to simply forgive them.

Crisp presents John McLeod Campbell’s vicarious penitence doctrine of the atonement. On this view, human sinfulness makes them incapable of achieving “a perfect sorrow and contrition” while apologizing and repenting for their sins (126). Because humans are not able to offer an appropriate apology and repentance, they remain estranged from God. Christ offers a perfect apology and repentance on our behalf. As Crisp puts it, Christ’s life and death are “one long act of apology, if you will, that is offered as reparation on behalf of fallen humanity” (125). God “treats Christ’s confession and penitence as if it were our penitence, and he ascribes it to us in order that he may be merciful to us instead” (126).

Chapter 8 discusses the “problem of atoning violence,” an objection to many of the traditional atonement doctrines. Crisp’s formulation of this objection is as follows:

- (1) It is morally wrong to perform violent acts.
- (2) God cannot perform morally wrong acts.
- (3) So, God cannot perform violent acts.
- (4) Many of the traditional atonement doctrines imply that God performs a violent act.
- (5) So, many of the traditional atonement doctrines are false. (131–132)

The violent act that God supposedly performs according to many of the traditional doctrines is the act of crucifying Christ. Since this violent act lies at the heart of the doctrines of satisfaction, penal substitution, and ransom, these doctrines must be mistaken.

After critiquing a few possible objections to the problem of atoning violence, Crisp proposes the "double effect response." According to this response, an action is violent only if it is performed with "the intention to harm" (140). So, the traditional atonement doctrines imply that God performed a violent act only if they imply that God performed some act with the intention to harm. But, Crisp argues, the traditional doctrines do not have this implication. While they do imply that God "[ensures] the crucifixion of Christ takes place as one central means to [the end of reconciliation between humans and Himself]," it is not the case that they imply that God intends to harm Christ (141). God intends only "to reconcile human beings to Godself" (140). So, premise (4) is mistaken.

By my lights, the double effect response is vulnerable to two objections. First, it's hard to see why anyone who finds it really implausible that God would perform a certain violent act would nonetheless be sanguine about God accomplishing his goals by ensuring that other people will perform that violent act. All of the reasons I can think of for finding the first thing implausible are also reasons to find the second thing implausible. To illustrate, if one's reason for finding it really implausible that God would perform a certain violent act is that this would make God an abusive being, then it seems like one should also find it really implausible that God would orchestrate things such that someone else does that act; for orchestrating things such that others will perform violent acts is another way that one can be abusive. In light of these considerations, it seems like the proponent of the problem of atoning violence would find the following argument just as compelling as the above argument:

- (1) It is morally wrong for one to act so as to ensure that other people will perform violent acts in order to accomplish one's ends.
- (2) God cannot perform morally wrong acts.
- (3) So, God cannot act so as to ensure that other people will perform violent acts in order to accomplish His ends.
- (4) Many of the traditional atonement doctrines imply that God acts so as to ensure that other people will perform violent acts in order to accomplish His ends.
- (5) Therefore, many of the traditional atonement doctrines are false.

Even if the double effect response succeeds in undermining premise (4) of the original problem of atoning violence, it seems likely that the proponent of that original argument would just move to this second version of the worry, so the double effect response doesn't really get to the heart of the matter. Crisp could defend his double effect response from this worry by offering some reason to think that it is morally much worse to commit violent acts than it is to act so as to ensure that other people will perform violent acts.

Second, the double effect response relies on the premise that an act is a violent act only if it is done with the intention to harm. This premise doesn't seem correct. Suppose that an abusive husband flies into a rage and throws a vase against the wall intending only to break the vase and vent his frustration. Suppose further that he accidentally hits his wife with the vase. If actions are violent only if they are done with an intention to harm, then the husband has not acted violently. But, surely, he has.

In chapter 9, Crisp introduces "mashup" and "kaleidoscopic" accounts of atonement. A mashup account is an atonement doctrine that incorporates elements of multiple historic doctrines of the atonement into a new, complex doctrine. Examples of mashup accounts include the account of J. Denny Weaver (who combines elements of Christus Victor and moral exemplarism), the account of James I. Packer (who combines elements of penal substitution, moral exemplarism, ransom, and satisfaction), and the account of Hans Boersma (who combines some Irenaean ideas, moral exemplarism, and Christus Victor). A kaleidoscopic account of atonement is not an atonement doctrine, but rather is a theory about the historic atonement doctrines. This theory holds that none of the historic atonement doctrines provide a "comprehensive account of the mechanism by means of which we are reconciled to Christ," but that many of the existing atonement doctrines are nonetheless "partial, incomplete 'windows' into the reality of Christ's reconciling work" (154, 156). Crisp presents the kaleidoscopic account of Joel Green and Mark Baker.

In the tenth and final chapter, Crisp presents his own intriguing atonement doctrine, which he calls the "union account." This doctrine places a lot of emphasis on the Pauline notion of union with Christ. As Crisp explains:

[I]n Romans 6:5 [Paul] states, 'If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.' The author of Ephesians even compares our union with Christ to the intimate union of a woman and man in marriage, saying that we are members of Christ's body, and that 'this is a profound mystery' (Eph 5:29–32). (164)

According to the union account, this union with Christ is the key to atonement. Fallen humans are estranged from God because of their sin, but by becoming united with Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit, they can become a member of a new group—the group of "redeemed humanity" (168). Redeemed humanity is a "real composite entity" whose first member is Christ (168, 170). Because this is so, Christ is able to take upon himself the penal consequences of the sins of those humans who are part of redeemed humanity, thereby "removing the obstacle of sin and reconciling members of fallen humanity to God" (175).

*Approaching the Atonement* is an excellent introductory book on the atonement. First, the writing is wonderfully clear. Second, the book's inclusion of a number of less well-known doctrines (in particular, the governmental and vicarious penitence doctrines, Crisp's own union account, and mashup doctrines) means that its discussion achieves greater breadth

than a lot of other introductions to the atonement. Third, the book is written with an enjoyable and engaging mix of pure exposition of other views and opinionated engagement with those views. I believe this book would serve well as the main reading for a unit on the atonement in a lower-division undergraduate course, as well as for an upper-division undergraduate course if paired with some more challenging primary sources on the atonement. It would also be the first book I would recommend to an intelligent friend who wants to begin learning about the atonement.

It is worth noting that there are a couple of things absent from *Approaching the Atonement* that one might want in an introduction to the atonement. First, it does not focus on identifying and discussing the biblical support for each atonement doctrine. And second, it does not include much discussion of the work of philosophers of religion. Crisp's book is focused instead on providing an introduction to theological work on the atonement, which it does superbly.

*Saving the Neanderthals: Sin, Salvation, and Hard Evolution*, by Mark S. McLeod-Harrison. Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2020. Pp. ix + 153. \$90.00 (hardcover).

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In *Saving the Neanderthals*, Mark S. McLeod-Harrison attempts to defend a controversial thesis: Christian theology is consistent with "hard evolution." "Hard evolution" is a term of art by which McLeod-Harrison refers to a scientific thesis that he calls a "next-to-worst case scenario" for Christian theology (xi). This is because the only position assumed by many biological evolutionists (*qua* biological evolutionists) that it rejects is metaphysical naturalism, a metaphysics that entails that God doesn't exist (xi). Hard evolution also assumes anti-essentialism, particularly with respect to biological species/kinds: strictly speaking, *there are neither species nor kinds, not in fact*, anyway (xi). The various names of species one might deploy to discuss biological entities merely operate as devices to label the modally accidental arrangements of biological stuff.

Why is it controversial that Christian theology is consistent with hard evolution? McLeod-Harrison thinks that there are potential inconsistencies between (1) how Christians often think about sin and salvation and (2) the deliverances of the biological sciences vis-à-vis biological evolution.

