



## BOOK REVIEW

### BOOK INFORMATION

Crisp, Oliver. *Approaching the Atonement: The Reconciling Work of Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020, ix + 193 pages, ISBN: 978-0-8308-5197-3.

Discussions of the atonement in Christian theology often begin with the popular etymology of the term as “at-one-ment,” referring to the reconciliation of humanity with God through the death of Jesus Christ. Yet Oliver Crisp argues that this common definition generates a theological puzzle because it does not explain how atonement truly works. The plurality of historical accounts of atonement, each claiming to be the most holistic explanation of the mechanism of Christ’s atoning work, further complicates the problem. This book sets out to explore this puzzle by addressing a series of questions concerning the mechanism of atonement. For instance, “How is it that the crucifixion of one person can somehow save other fallen human beings?” (p. 2), and, “Why the death of this particular person, why not someone else?” (p. 3).

The novelty of this book is evident from its outset. Employing the method of analytic theology, Crisp approaches atonement as a theological topic by engaging critically with three influential taxonomies: Ben Pugh’s distinction between objective and subjective versions of atonement (which Crisp regards as overly binary); Colin Gunton’s interpretation of atonement accounts as renditions of biblical metaphors (which Crisp argues neglects their conceptual content); and Gustaf Aulén’s tripartite typology (classical, vicarious, and moral exemplar variations—which Crisp considers limited for not accommodating the complexities of the accounts of atonement). In place of these taxonomies, Crisp constructs some conceptual demarcations that are uniquely his own. He distinguishes between the nature (how

the atonement works) and scope (how many are atoned) of the atonement; clarifies the difference between forgiveness and reparation (the latter being central to a doctrine of atonement); and determines whether the accounts of atonement are best understood as doctrines, metaphors, models, or theories (he argues that most of them serve best as models—approximations to the reality of Christ’s atoning work—rather than exhaustive explanations of it).

Crisp structures his response to the puzzle of atonement according to these conceptual demarcations. The book unfolds through surveys of influential historical accounts of atonement as attempts to explain its mechanism: beginning with patristic perspectives, the ransom view, the satisfaction account, the penal substitution view, and up to variations of governmental and vicarious penitence accounts.

Crisp treats each account like “witnesses” to the mechanism of atonement delineated in Scripture (p. 5). Most of the chapters explicate the core premises of their respective account, followed by analytical argumentation both for and against these premises. For instance, Crisp follows his explanation of the Anselmian satisfaction account in chapter four with rebuttals to common objections to it (e.g., that the view has lost its veracity due to its feudalistic origin, which Crisp considers a genetic fallacy; and that it espouses a violent depiction of God, an objection neglecting Anselm’s own remark on divine mercy). But these rebuttals are accompanied by a concern over the account’s incompleteness due to Anselm’s silence on how sinners may appropriate the benefits of Christ’s atoning work.

Toward the end of the book, Crisp adopts a more constructive approach. In the eighth chapter, he proposes two alternative accounts of atonement in response to feminist and Mennonite critiques of the violence implied by traditional atonement language. He also offers his own view of the atonement in the tenth chapter, drawing on recent New Testament scholarship on the Pauline notion of being in Christ. In this account, the atonement is understood as believers’ participation in Christ’s death and resurrection, through which the benefits of Christ’s reconciling work become effective in their lives. The book, therefore, exemplifies the methodological

synthesis that characterizes much of Crisp's work: the use of analytical theology to clarify concepts, followed by constructive dogmatic reflection.

The primary strength of this book lies in its methodological approach. Crisp's analytic style secures the conceptual clarity of his arguments. Every key term is defined clearly and used consistently, ensuring logical coherence. Such clarity enables Crisp to challenge several common caricatures in contemporary discussions of atonement. For instance, in response to Aulén's contention that the primitive church mainly espoused the ransom/*Christus Victor* view of the atonement, Crisp demonstrates that some patristic theologians (e.g., Irenaeus, Athanasius) utilize substitutional language to explain Christ's death on the cross.

Moreover, Crisp's conceptual demarcations also help to illuminate the fact that not all accounts of atonement are equal. The moral exemplar view, for instance, cannot function as a doctrine of atonement because it lacks the reparative mechanism required for reconciliation. Moreover, it is more accurate to define the ransom view as a motif that aids our understanding of atonement rather than a doctrine of atonement. This is because the former does not offer a comprehensive explanation of how Christ buys back fallen humanity from the powers of sin and death, rendering the nature of the ransom itself conceptually unclear.

However, this book suffers from two limitations. First, its constructive thesis—that no single account of atonement can exhaust the biblical witness of Christ's atoning work—emerges most clearly only in the later chapters. Therefore, readers may find the opening chapters somewhat exploratory before the direction of the argument becomes fully apparent. Second, the book's illustrative analogies occasionally demand conceptual familiarity that some readers may not possess. While examples such as the engrafting of a new oak branch or the nourishment of the human body help clarify how Christ's atoning work becomes effective for humanity, other illustrations—such as explaining *theosis* through the mathematical notion of an asymptote, or describing the nature of the accounts of atonement through the model of light in contemporary optics—may prove difficult for uninitiated readers.

Despite these limitations, Crisp's study offers a lucid and rigorous engagement with various notions of atonement. The book will be particularly valuable for students and scholars interested in analytic theology, systematic theology, and contemporary debates surrounding the reconciling work of Christ.

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