

“Leroy Spinks has written a heartfelt and convincing argument that salvation in the New Testament is not founded on a legal theory, but on a family relationship. He effectively argues that the primary metaphor used by Jesus and the early church is God as a loving Father, and that atonement is reconciliation within a family, not a legal transaction. He describes how Christianity suffered a ‘great amnesia’ about the loving Father, and how medieval concepts of honor and satisfaction came to shape Christian thinking. In a book that remains very readable, Spinks marshals biblical and historical knowledge to sustain his argument.”

*Stephen Finlan  
Pastor, The First Church  
West Bridgewater, Mass.*

“Leroy Spinks writes as a pastor-theologian. As a pastor, he describes what Christian laypersons today believe about the meaning of Jesus’ death and the prominence of penal substitution in their understanding. As a theologian, he interprets the many diverse biblical teachings about Jesus’ sacrifice and surveys what other theologians have written about it across twenty centuries. He offers a brilliant, powerful thesis of his own: God our loving Father has pursued us, his prodigal children, all the way to the cross in order to bring us back into his family where he works to transform our lives and through us to transform the world. I recommend this wonderful book enthusiastically. I hope it will give all of its readers an enriched appreciation for the good news that ‘Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.’”

*Fisher Humphreys  
Professor of Divinity Emeritus  
Samford University*

“In this carefully documented and well-written book, Leroy Spinks argues persuasively for the rejection of the notion that Jesus had to be punished on the cross for the sins of humanity. Appealing to Old Testament metaphors of God as liberator and redeemer of Israel, Spinks argues that the contribution of Jesus and his followers was the understanding of God as the personal liberator and redeemer of individuals as well. He presents the reader with a God who forgives our sin and rebellion, not because of the cross, but despite it, and draws us into a safe and loving family. I recommend this volume for serious adult Bible study groups.”

*Sharyn Dowd  
Retired New Testament scholar and pastor  
Decatur, Ga.*

“I, like Leroy Spinks, grew up in a Christian home with a loving father and mother. As a child I learned ‘for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.’ I believed that as a child and still do. I must admit that I have really never delved into explanations of the atonement in any detailed way. My life has been filled with medical/surgical training and then later a busy practice of thoracic and cardiac surgery. But throughout the years, I have never lost sight of the wonderful realization that God loved me enough to send his Son—for me, and for everyone else! In this book I found the thorough descriptions of various theories of the atonement to be extremely interesting. Especially enlightening are the historical explanations of the differing concepts. The sidebar charts are well done and helpful in recapitulating the information presented in short form, making it easy to rethink what I had just read in orderly fashion. It gives me great comfort and peace of mind to realize fully that the Father—my Abba—sent his Son to reconcile all of us unto himself.”

*Joel Avery*  
*Retired cardio-thoracic surgeon*  
*Chattanooga, Tenn.*

“Finding traditional explanations of the atonement, particularly the penal substitutionary theory, both unhelpful and unfaithful to the teaching of Jesus, Leroy Spinks sets out to develop an understanding of the atonement based on Jesus’ life and teachings. Focusing on such things as Jesus’ relationship with God as represented by his use of *Abba* and the Hebraic near-kin redeemer model, he offers fresh insights into the meaning of the cross. All who desire a deeper understanding of the atonement will find this book of interest.”

*Hulitt Gloer*  
*Professor Emeritus of Preaching and Christian Scripture*  
*George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University*

“Leroy Spinks has provided a spirited argument against the current, prevailing atonement theory that portrays Jesus’ crucifixion as an act of propitiation of God the Father. Spinks maintains that the development of this theory can be traced from its roots in the ‘Great Confusion’ of the second and third centuries and through medieval feudalism, Anselm’s satisfaction theory, and Calvin’s thought concerning penal substitutionary atonement. In contrast, Spinks argues that Christians should understand the atonement as Jesus proclaimed and lived it, as the means of reconciliation to a loving, heavenly Father in alignment with the Father’s deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt and exile in Babylon. Written for lay folk, this book covers a great deal of ground and presents a welcome, critical voice among today’s theological ideas.”

*Jim McConnell*  
*Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation*  
*Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity*

# *Alba, Father*

VIEWING ATONEMENT THROUGH THE JESUS LENS

Leroy Spinks

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I wish to dedicate this work to the First Baptist Church of Chattanooga, the Waters Sunday School class, and our pastor Dr. Thomas Quisenberry, all of whom provided much emotional and spiritual support and inspiration during the writing of this manuscript.

# *Introduction*

## **The Church's Struggle with the Atonement**

### **A Haunting Sermon Illustration**

Our revival preacher was in full evangelistic pleading voice as I sat on the right end of the second pew from the front beside my cousin and aunt. He had mastered the use of his voice to touch the emotions of his audience, and he certainly could stir our feelings. His flaming oratory mesmerized this twelve-year-old kid.

“Let me tell you a story from the American frontier,” he intoned. “Little Johnny was caught stealing a pencil from another student. Mr. Thompson, the teacher, told Johnny to take off his shirt for the beating he had so rightfully earned. When Johnny took off his shirt, the class gasped at his skinny back, his ribs and backbone showing through his pale skin. What would Mr. Thompson do?”

“At that moment Billy stood up,” the evangelist continued. “Tall. Rugged. Well built. ‘I’ll take his beating, Mr. Thompson.’”

“So, Billy took off his shirt, laid down across little Johnny, and took the ten licks from Mr. Thompson’s cane across his bare back.” The preacher paused, looking at each of us as his story sank in. “And that is what Jesus did for each and every one of you.” The evangelist’s voice practically wept with emotion.

I am sure many an eye in the congregation filled with tears as the preacher completed his story. We could all identify with Johnny’s relief at not having to take the beating. We could all admire Billy’s courage in taking Johnny’s beating for him. This child, however, felt overwhelming revulsion. I identified with Johnny. I admired Billy. But the teacher horrified me. If Johnny represented us, and Billy represented Christ, then the teacher represented God!

“What kind of teacher would do any of that?” I thought in horror. “And I’m supposed to believe God is like that? No sirree, Bob! The God I know and love is not like that. My God is not cruel—not even in the name of justice.”

From that moment on, I rejected the way our preachers frequently presented the gospel—not the gospel itself, but the way they sometimes told the story. Of course, most of the time they preached simply the love, mercy, and grace of God given us in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, when they devoted a sermon to explaining how Christ’s death provides forgiveness of sin, they always reverted to the second version as represented in the above story with its horrible image of Christ taking our punishment from God to make it possible for God to forgive us. That version is possibly how you have frequently heard the gospel preached, too.

## A Positive, Encouraging Gospel

We never hear in my present church the kind of preaching described above. In our church, we only hear the positive, encouraging gospel of the love of God extending to everyone, offering God's grace to all who will receive it. Many believers have always been a part of churches preaching the positive gospel our pastor and church proclaim. These Christians do not identify with my childhood experience. Still, the terrible vision of someone having to die to pay God back for our sin has had a negative effect even on the thinking of this latter group without their necessarily realizing it. Even in our more positive version of the gospel, there remains something of a hole in our theology.

What do we do with the Easter season? That period in the church year focuses on the death of Jesus Christ by crucifixion. But what is the significance of that death? Each time we observe Communion (the Lord's Supper), we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). Why does the church regularly, repeatedly celebrate the *death* of Jesus? Many Christians wear an ornamental cross around their necks to signify their faith in the cross of Christ. Roman Catholic Christians regularly make the sign of the cross as a symbol of their faith. The Greek letter *chi* (which looks much like our English letter "X") has long been a symbol for Jesus Christ. It comes from the twin facts that the first letter of "Christ" in Greek is *chi* and the Greek cross was shaped like that letter.

An ancient symbol of Christianity is the *chi-rho*—the Greek letters *chi* and *rho*—superimposed over one another. This symbol represents both the first two letters of Christ in Greek and the shape of the Greek cross. This symbol, which goes back at least to the time of Constantine, regularly appears in church banners. Many churches have a Roman cross affixed to the wall somewhere in their worship sanctuary.

Why is the Christian faith so full of representations of the cross on which Jesus died? What other religion or national group celebrates as the center of its culture the *death* of its founder—particularly the tortured *execution* of its founder as a criminal? Christianity does not just commemorate Jesus' grisly death; we celebrate it and glory in it. That singular characteristic of the church is at least curious, is it not? Our theology should offer some explanation of that unique trait of our faith.

The theology inculcated into us as children contained an explanation for the death of Christ celebrated in Communion and Easter. Jesus literally took our place, we were told. He paid our sin debt. He died for our sin to make it possible for God to forgive us and make us his children. Having given up that theology, what do we put in its place? How do we now explain the salvation Jesus Christ proclaimed and brought to humankind, now symbolized by the cross?

## Questions

Having rejected the version of the gospel that so repulsed me as a child, I settled into a simple faith that God loves us and saves us through Jesus Christ. Precisely how he does that and what part Jesus' death plays in that salvation, though, has long sat uneasily in my mind. Even having rejected the theology of the cross of my rearing, the gospel of the terrible wrath of God demanding a death to pay for Adam's sin—for which we are guilty—continued to stalk the recesses of my mind.

As the atheist Richard Dawkins asks in *The God Delusion*, “If God wanted to forgive our sins, why not just forgive them, without having himself tortured and executed in payment?”<sup>1</sup> Like Dawkins, although a disciple of Jesus Christ, I found myself asking the same question. Reportedly, in his early life Dawkins was educated in Anglican schools. Surely, he did not hear in the Church of England that fundamentalist theology of my childhood. So, what was the source of Dawkins' haunting question? Possibly it came from the lack of a clear answer to the question, “Why did Jesus die to bring us God's forgiveness and salvation?”

I have always known that my experience of God came through Jesus who died on the cross. Still, I could not adequately explain how Christ's death provided atonement with God. Early in adulthood, having come to understand the nature of the Bible as presented in my previous book *The Jesus Lens*, the fundamentalist theology of my childhood and youth fell behind.<sup>2</sup> Still, that original question loomed: “How did Jesus provide atonement for the human race?” Merely abandoning one theology without putting something better in its place did not entirely satisfy. Through the years I have preached many of the basic ideas in this book, but I was still plagued with the feeling that I did not have a biblical basis for my theology of the cross.

## Two Intriguing Conversations

While some people may think the theology that repulsed me as a child is totally a thing of the past, these ideas continue to crop up even now.

A young veterinarian attended the Sunday morning worship service of our church and then invited me out for breakfast. Thinking he was about to join or wished to discuss my sermon, I was thrilled. Soon after sitting down with him in the restaurant, he startled me with the accusation of not teaching my people properly. “Your Sunday School teachers don't even know the meaning of the word ‘propitiation,’” he charged. It turns out he had challenged the teacher of the class he attended to define the word “propitiation” in 1 John 2:2 (King James Version). Of course, the teacher could not. That proved I was failing my people.

I responded, “Well, I don't know why he should know that word. It isn't a very important word in the New Testament.”

He protested indignantly that it is the most important word in the New Testament and all of theology, to which I replied that it and similar words and concepts rarely occur in the New Testament, and two of the rare occurrences of the Greek word in the New Testament actually mean “mercy seat.” The other two times are in the little book of 1 John; and even there, the Greek word does not mean “propitiation.” It is hardly a major New Testament idea. This young professional insisted that someone has to pay God back for the debt we have incurred by our sin. Someone has to “propitiate” God—appease him, placate him—assuage his anger at our sin against him and his law.

Several years later I was serving in another church on the other end of the state. A young medical doctor invited me out for breakfast after attending our Sunday morning worship service. Exactly the same conversation took place, almost word for word. Interestingly, both these young professionals had moved to these locations from the same major church in a university town of our state. I suspect they had been trained there to do exactly what they had both done—confront pastors not preaching that archaic theology and show them the error of their ways.

### **An Advertising Door Hanger**

Recently someone from a local church left a professionally designed and produced advertising piece hanging on our front door knob, inviting us to their worship services. The photograph on the card showed a smiling, attractive pastor with his wife and children. The quality of the flyer shows this pastor and his church care enough to do things first class. That someone took the time to place invitations on the doors of strangers shows they care about the spiritual welfare of their community. Most striking, however, was their statement of faith. Titled “You Can Have A Personal Relationship with God through Jesus Christ,” their statement had five bulleted points.

- Realize God loves you.
- Realize everyone is a sinner.
- Realize sin has a price that must be paid.
- Realize Jesus Christ died and rose again to pay for your sin.
- Pray and ask Jesus Christ to be your Savior.

Now, who could quarrel with the title of that advertising piece? Everyone yearns for a personal relationship with God, or the Eternal, or Ultimate Truth—however an individual may express it. The first point on the door-hanger thrills. The love of God absolutely holds center place in the gospel according to Jesus. Who could disagree

with the second point? A person does not have to be a biblical scholar or a theologian to recognize that our entire world is messed up. We see human sin and evil everywhere—in international affairs; in national, state, and local government; even in churches and families. What is more, if we examine our own actions, motives, and desires, we recognize that the line of ignorance and evil of our world runs straight through every heart—even our own.

Then, there's that third point. Does this pastor realize he ultimately received it from a priest born, reared, educated, and conditioned in medieval feudal Europe and England nine hundred years ago? Does he have any comprehension that Archbishop Anselm designed this statement of the Christian faith to communicate with a people almost a millennium ago barely out of pagan superstition? And what about that fourth point? There's nothing about God seeking lost children and nothing about Jesus, the embodiment of God, calling us back into God's family. That point focuses only on paying God back the suffering and pain we deserve because we dissed God's honor, or justice, or righteousness, or holiness (whichever this pastor focuses on). Here we are face to face with *propitiation* again.

This young pastor is no doubt a wonderful husband, father, pastor, and friend. Certainly, beyond any shadow of doubt, he loves Jesus and the Bible as the word of God. Without having met him, he appears a likeable pastor and friend. His theology, however, does present a problem for many people. He did not draw it from the Bible. More importantly, he did not learn it from Jesus Christ. The brochure his church distributes is a current example of the force of pagan law and tradition having crept into the church and Christian theology nine centuries years ago.

### **It's Hard to Escape This Theology**

Max Lucado, pastor of the Oak Hills Church in San Antonio, Texas, has thrilled readers for years with his uplifting books on the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> Lucado presents Christ in a positive, refreshing way. He has for the most part abandoned the old theology; but even he cannot totally escape the 900-year impact of the old tradition. Even Lucado retains something of Anselm's and Calvin's satisfaction theories, in spite of himself, in writing of God's having been "appeased" by the death of Christ, for example.<sup>4</sup>

Not everyone who accepts Calvin's penal substitutionary view of the atonement proclaims it in quite the plain, unvarnished manner presented here. Still, when we hear talk of "paying our sin debt" or "satisfying God's justice," we can know the speaker holds that old theology. When we hear preachers intoning on "the wrath of God," we can frequently suspect that old theology of the atonement lurks in the background. When theologians or ministers speak of the atonement producing

some effect in God, or enabling God's forgiveness, they show they have been influenced by this way of thinking. It appears that most ministers, laymen, and especially hymnists no longer truly believe this old way of proclaiming the cross, but few of us can escape its influence entirely. An editor of a religious journal recently commented that the issue of the atonement continues to haunt many non-fundamentalist ministers as well as laymen.

### **A Beloved Old Hymn**

This old theology chases us into every by-way and alley no matter how hard we try to escape it. The evidence jumped out recently from that beloved old hymn "What Wondrous Love is This." This work of gorgeous music and captivating poetry shocked me as we sang the first two stanzas.

What wonderous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!  
What wonderous love is this, O my soul!  
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss  
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,  
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul.

When I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down,  
When I was sinking down, sinking down,  
When I was sinking down beneath God's righteous frown . . .

"Bear the curse? Sinking down beneath God's righteous frown?" No matter how you try to explain away that theology, it is still Anselm and Calvin coming at us with a terrifying medieval picture of God and the atonement. And it showed up in a hymnal in which almost none of the hymns know such a horrible conception of God. We find it difficult to escape this idea that has plagued the church for almost a millennium.

### **A Fresh Look at Atonement**

In *Abba, Father: Viewing Atonement through the Jesus Lens*, I set out to rethink atonement in a departure from what is possibly the most popular theory among conservative Christians. This book reexamines atonement by giving careful attention to the words of Jesus. It abandons entirely the concept of "the atonement" held as the most popular view among conservative evangelicals today.

Most of the classic theories of the atonement proposed what the authors intended to be literal, often legal, explanations of what Jesus did for us on the cross.

One of the older popular theories dating back to the third and fourth centuries proposed the literal, legal explanation that Jesus paid a ransom to the devil for our souls. Several centuries later Anselm proposed the literal, legal theory that Jesus made satisfaction (paid God compensation or reparations) for our offense to God's honor. Several centuries after that, the Reformer John Calvin proposed that Jesus paid our sin debt for our offense to God's justice. (Chapters 7, 8, and 9 will trace the history of these theories.) Mention of the classical theories of the atonement refers to these three theories (plus another discussed briefly in chapter 7). These theories proposed the idea that the cross of Christ provided "the atonement"—an event that made it possible for God to forgive us and make us his children.

The New Testament shows that Jesus did not preach any "theory of the atonement." In fact, Jesus never used any word that could be translated "atonement," nor did he preach any concept that could be so construed. Jesus proclaimed the metaphor of the loving Father. Jesus taught how we are to reconcile (although he never used that word, either) with the Father, not how the Father reconciles himself to us. In addition, the message of all the New Testament authors following Jesus continued this theme while also offering many other metaphors illustrating how Jesus brings us back to God. The view presented here does not claim to be Jesus' theory of the atonement, for the New Testament evidence does not indicate that he had one. Instead, the following chapters will develop what Jesus proclaimed as his Good News of the kingdom of God. Once we understand the gospel Jesus preached, we do not need any theory of the atonement. Jesus' message as communicated through his favorite metaphor stands sufficient on its own.

The obsession of much of the church with the concept of the atonement represents a departure from Jesus' own message. This analysis of Jesus' teaching, therefore, will speak only of "atonement" in the sense of our "reconciliation" to God, not of "*the* atonement"—an event that made it possible for holy God to accept us into his family. This work will develop these ideas in the hope that by the end of the book the reader will grasp a new conception of the message Jesus proclaimed.

This book is not intended to be a study of the doctrine of the atonement. The following chapters will not explore all the different theories of the atonement, assessing their strengths and weaknesses. It is not even designed as a study of New Testament teaching on the atonement. You will not find in these pages a study of Paul's or Peter's doctrine of the atonement. To go even further, this book is not even a study of Jesus' doctrine of the atonement, for he never approached that subject. Jesus never uttered the word "atonement" or any other word that can be translated that way. "The atonement" is *our* obsession that first arose during the second

century and afterward and came to hold center place in church theology from about 1100 CE onward.

This book addresses one single issue: What did Jesus teach relevant to our obsession with the atonement? Until we can ascertain what Jesus said relevant to atonement, we are not ready to discuss the wider issue of New Testament teaching on that subject or to build a church doctrine of atonement.

The approach adopted here will present some readers with problems of translation into today's idiom. We must first understand Jesus' teaching, however, before attempting to translate it into a mode of expression that resonates today. Chapter 11, "Tying Up Loose Ends," will deal with the problems Jesus' message presents some people today and translate it into a manner of speaking that communicates with our contemporaries.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 253.

<sup>2</sup>Leroy Spinks, *The Jesus Lens* (Macon, GA: Nurturing Faith, 2018).

<sup>3</sup>For example, Max Lucado, *No Wonder They Call Him the Savior* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 27.