



GENERAL INTRODUCTION

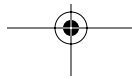
Frank A. James III

The analytic philosopher A. J. Ayer argued that a strong case could be made that of the world religions, Christianity was the worst. He based his judgment on the fact that Christianity rests on the “allied doctrines of original sin and vicarious atonement,” which, he added, “are intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous.”¹ Ayer was right about one thing—historic orthodox Christianity does rest in a profound sense on these twin foundations. Ronald Wallace asserts, “The death of Christ was central to the thinking of the New Testament writers about God, man and life itself. It was the cross they spoke about first of all in the summary of the Gospel. It was toward the cross they turned to experience the power of God, the forgiveness of sins and newness of life.”² Ayer is right about another thing: these doctrines are contemptible and outrageous to the outsider. If Christ’s atonement is still powerful enough to excite the antipathy of A. J. Ayer, it is a reminder of the apostle Paul’s warning that the cross is a “stumbling block” to unbelievers. It also demonstrates that the atonement is still a worthy topic of serious reflection.

This book centers on one of Ayer’s outrageous doctrines—the atonement. And there is, indeed, an outrageous aspect to the atonement because it revolves around such disquieting concepts as death, blood sac-

¹A. J. Ayer, *The Guardian*, August 30, 1979, cited by J. R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 43.

²Ronald Wallace, *The Atoning Death of Christ* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1981), 63.

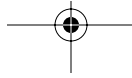




rifice, guilt, sin, wrath and propitiation. With such notions in view, the thoughtful Christian might ask: Why must God employ such distasteful means to effect salvation? The atonement is further complicated by the idea of substitution. How can a just God permit the innocent to substitute for the guilty? The truth of the matter is that it has proven difficult for Christian theologians to adequately probe the full depth of the meaning of this doctrine within a single all-encompassing theory. Hence, there has been considerable diversity among Christians down through the ages—a diversity that, as a practical matter, has often relegated the idea of the atonement to the academic ivory tower, in part because for the average Christian it was, as it were, too hot to handle. Even for theologians this doctrine has resisted domestication. It is complex and multifaceted and has therefore defied Christian consensus.

The contributors to this volume are among the ablest theologians working today. Most of our contributors have some association with Dr. Nicole—most have worked with him as a colleague and know him personally; others know him by reputation. This group represents something of the wide swath of Christian scholarship, from North America and Europe (United States, France, Canada, England and Scotland) as well as a diversity of ecclesiological traditions—Anglican, Presbyterian, Southern Baptist, Evangelical Free and Dutch Reformed. The national and denominational variety is itself a measure of Nicole's enduring legacy. Because of this variety, there will inevitably be differences of academic opinion, but the primary goal is not unanimity but a reminder to readers that this is a topic worthy of vigorous discussion. Better than anyone we know, Dr. Nicole knows "How to Deal with Those Who Differ from Us," as he titled one of his essays. Most importantly, it was judged that above all we must carefully consider the biblical dimensions of this doctrine—even where there are different theological perspectives informing the exegesis. This biblical concern lies at the center of this book.

In carrying out this goal, the editors intend in this volume, insofar as it is possible, to reconnoiter the outer perimeters as well as some of the inner workings of this doctrine from three angles: the Bible, church history and the Christian life. In the opinion of the editors, too many biblical scholars engage in exegesis without any sense of the historical context or the theological developments. To remedy that, this book approaches the topic of atonement from multiple perspectives in an effort to get a better



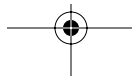


grasp of the idea of atonement. Of course, there are many other theological contributions to the doctrine of the atonement that we could have considered—Schleiermacher and Ritschl are but two that come to mind. But due to space limitations, we have had to make choices in our coverage. The book that follows is structured around these three foci.

If one is to honor Roger Nicole and at the same time appreciate the atonement, one first must turn to the Scriptures. He would never forgive us if we did not begin with the Book of Books. It is evident that the language and the idea of the cross is central to the biblical message of Christ. One finds various metaphors employed to communicate the essential message that Christ died for sinners. It is one thing to read the Scriptures; it is another to interpret them aright. We agree with Dr. Nicole that theology is best conceived in community and thus to do it correctly entails an ongoing dialogue not only with each other but also with theologians of the past. Theological forebears offer us not only a range of interpretations of the cross but also some sense of perspective. To gain wisdom from the past, we must interact with the best insights of our predecessors.

Reading the Scriptures and gaining insight through a dialogue with history still does not address application to the individual Christian life. Apprehending the truth is not always the same thing as internalizing it. To fail to internalize the atonement in one's own life, both behind and in front of the Sunday morning pulpit is to fail at a crucial point. If the atonement is rightly understood, it must have a practical and personal significance. Moreover, the atonement belongs in the evangelical pulpit, and if it is as valuable as we think it is, it must be preached in the church. We fundamentally agree that the aim of all theology is a changed life—or, as Martin Bucer, the Alsatian Reformer of the sixteenth century and John Calvin's mentor, put it so well nearly five hundred years ago: "True theology is not theoretical or speculative, but active and practical. For it is directed toward . . . a godly life. . . . It is theology's aim . . . that we shall ever more firmly trust in God and live a life that is increasingly holy and more serviceable in love toward our neighbor."³

³Herman J. Selderhuis, *Marriage and Divorce in the Thought of Martin Bucer*, trans. J. Vriend and Lyle Bierma (Kirksville, Mo.: Thomas Jefferson University Press at Truman State University, 1999), 356.





Perhaps the reason the atonement has fallen on hard times is that most Christians have not understood well its meaning or its significance for their personal lives. Somehow we have lost the connection and interest in one of the basic questions for Christians—namely, why did Jesus have to die on the cross? Was it a defeat or a triumph? The editors believe that to understand the atonement is to gain a deeper understanding of Christ and his salvation and that such an understanding will enrich the Christian life immeasurably.

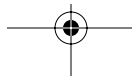
The doctrine of the atonement strikes a very deep chord in Dr. Nicole's Swiss heart because he believes it lies at the center of the gospel. He would echo the words of Stephen Neill, who stated: "The death of Christ is the central point in history."⁴ The doctrine of the atonement is like a pebble dropped into a theological pond—it makes ripples throughout the entire system. Historically, systematic theology has tended to understand the atonement as part of the priestly work of Christ. As our priest, Christ is our representative with God, and his special responsibility is to act on behalf of the people of God to bring them near to God. The atoning work of the great high priest is viewed from various angles in the New Testament. It may be viewed in terms of Christ's sacrifice—that he paid the penalty of death for us; or his propitiation—that he removed the wrath of God from us; or his reconciliation—that he overcame our separation from God; or his redemption—that he redeemed us from our bondage to sin. But the atonement also must be connected with its implications for soteriology. In the words of Leon Morris, "The crucifixion is rightly understood only when it is seen as God's great saving act."⁵ Thus, in the panoramic view of the priestly work of Christ, not only is redemption accomplished for the people of God, but it also provides the only foundation for the application of redemption in terms of calling, regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification and glorification.⁶

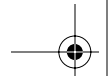
It is no wonder that theologians have waxed eloquent about the centrality of the atonement. Few, however, have reached the rhetorical heights of Emil Brunner, who said that the atonement "is the Christian

⁴Stephen Neill, "Jesus and History," in *Truth of God Incarnate*, ed. E. M. B. Green (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1977), 80.

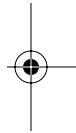
⁵Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 11.

⁶John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 80-81.





religion itself; it is the main point; it is not something alongside of the center; it is the substance and kernel, not the husk."⁷ To this sentiment Roger Nicole would add his hearty "Amen." And so it is that we, his colleagues and admirers, pay tribute to our friend and mentor with a book dedicated not only to Roger but to one of his favorite doctrines.



⁷Emil Brunner, *The Mediator* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), 40.

