



## EXCERPT



### ***Approaching the Atonement*** ***The Reconciling Work of Christ***

Available February 11, 2020 | \$22, 208 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5197-3

Theologian Oliver Crisp explores the meaning of the cross and the various ways that the death of Jesus has been interpreted in the church's history—from ransom theory in the early church to penal substitutionary theory to more recent feminist critiques. What emerges is a more complex, expansive, and fruitful understanding of the atonement and its significance for the Christian faith today.

## What is the atonement?

One of the oldest summaries of Christian doctrine is the Apostles' Creed. It is used today in many churches throughout the world, where it is recited as part of the liturgy. Even if it isn't a part of regular church worship, most Christians are familiar with it as an important summary of the faith. However, if we are to approach it with the idea of trying to see what it says about the doctrine of the atonement, that is, Christ's work of reconciliation, we will be disappointed. It does give us certain information about events in the life of Christ: his conception; his birth; his suffering; his death and descent to the dead; and his resurrection and ascension. But which of these events constitute the atonement? Which of these things brought about human salvation? We are not told.

This ambiguity in the Apostles' Creed reflects the fact that there is no single view of the atonement that is universally agreed upon by all Christians. Instead, there are a number of different views of the matter, which have grown up over time and represent the contributions of particular theologians or church communities to our greater understanding of how it is that Christ's work atones for human sin. We might say that there is no canonical definition of the atonement, no official church doctrine on the matter that is shared across different churches and denominations, though there are views expressed by particular church bodies and denominations. This is strange because the same is not true of other central teachings of Christianity, such as the Trinity or the incarnation, where there is ecumenical agreement on a conceptual or doctrinal core that all Christians confess.

In the case of the Trinity, theological battles were fought in the early church over what was the right way to express this central and defining Christian mystery. It was not until the formulation of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed at the First Council of Constantinople in AD 381 that the churches had a clear doctrine of the Trinity. But with the decision reached by that council, the theological landscape changed. Thereafter, there was a form of words that could be used to express something of this mystery of the Godhead in a way that could be grasped by all Christians. As a result, we now confess that God is one in essence, and yet three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the central and defining doctrine of the Christian faith.

The incarnation is like the doctrine of the Trinity in that it too was a matter of dispute in the early church, and it too received attention by several great ecumenical councils of church leaders. At the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 the familiar two natures doctrine was promulgated. Even if most Christians aren't acquainted with the term "two natures doctrine," what it conveys is probably familiar in some respect. The idea was that Christ is one divine person, with a divine nature, who takes on a human nature in addition to his divine one in order to become incarnate. Hence, "two natures," one divine and one human, possessed by one person who is the Second Person of the Trinity. Like the doctrine of the Trinity, this is now part of the very fabric of Christian faith. But it was not always so. It took time, controversy, and reflection on what Scripture and the apostles taught to come to this view.



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The same is not true of the atonement, despite the fact that this too is a central theological commitment of Christianity. Instead, over time different ways of understanding this doctrine have grown up and been embraced by different groups of Christians. Today, there are a plethora of different views about the reconciling work of Christ, and precisely how we should understand this doctrine remains a source of dispute among Christians of different denominations and affiliations. For this reason, if for no other, it is worth spending time considering the doctrine of the atonement and the different accounts that have been put forward by Christian thinkers down through the ages.

—Taken from chapter one, “Approaching the Atonement”



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