

**Confessing Jesus in a Pluralistic World
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**We Preach Christ Crucified
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A. Introduction

Shortly after I accepted this assignment last fall I began reading on the atonement. It didn't take me long to realize that my own understanding of the atonement, despite teaching at a Bible College for many years, was rather shallow. Yes I affirmed the centrality of Jesus' death and resurrection for salvation, but there was a depth to the meaning of the atonement that I had not explored. I also realized that I could not remember the last time I had heard a sermon on the atonement. I am now very grateful for the opportunity to discover afresh the wonder of the atonement.

As Mennonite Brethren we proclaim that "Christ triumphed over sin through his death and resurrection" (Article 1). We confess today, just as we have done in the past, that "God reconciled the world to himself by the atoning blood of Jesus" (Article 5). We do not shy away from declaring, "We believe that the saving grace of God in Jesus is the only means of reconciling humanity with God. Although salvation is available to all, only those who put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ have the assurance of eternal life...The Bible teaches that those who reject the gospel are under divine judgment...Our task is to proclaim Christ as the only way of salvation to all people in all cultures" (Article 17). Our questions concerning the atonement do not entail wondering whether Jesus really saves or is Jesus the only way of salvation. (See the text of the MB Confession articles at the end of the paper.)

B. Approaches to Understanding the Atonement

Our proclamation that Jesus died and rose again is at the very heart of the gospel message. The atonement refers to Jesus' death and resurrection as the means by which humanity can be brought into a right relationship with God. The New Testament writers used a wide array of images to describe the atonement. For example, John Driver lists at least ten unique images. We wrestle with how to make sense of this diverse range of images.

Conflict/Victory/Liberation	Expiation/Wrath of God
Vicarious Suffering	Redemption
Archetypal/Representative	Reconciliation
Justification	Martyr
Sacrifice	Adoption/Family

John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1986).

The atonement debate revolves around understanding exactly how does Jesus' death on the cross save us?

I will highlight very briefly three different approaches to understanding the atonement. In many ways these approaches are a matter of emphasis, yet these emphases lead in different directions.

1. One Central Image

First, the typical approach within Christian history to answering the question regarding how Jesus' death saves, has been to develop a comprehensive explanation or theory of atonement that systematizes all the biblical texts describing Jesus' death into a coherent framework. The tendency, however, has been to select only one or two key atonement images that relate to a critical aspect of human need. These explanations of atonement have settled into three main groups with numerous variations under each one.

The liberation or *Christus Victor* view addresses our enslavement to the power of sin by focusing on Jesus' triumphant victory over Satan, which results in our deliverance and freedom.

The penal substitution view addresses our guilt before God by focusing on Christ's substitutionary sacrifice, which results in our forgiveness and justification.

The moral influence view addresses the sinful human heart by focusing on God's love for humanity, which results in our transformation.

While evangelicals affirm the variety of images used in the New Testament to describe the significance of the cross, their debate emerges over how to understand the relationship of those images. For example, in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, the authors seek to defend one explanation of the atonement as the central or foundational view over against the others. The risk with emphasizing only one or two images is that we may miss out on recognizing the full depth and significance of the atonement proclaimed in the New Testament.

James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds., *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006).

2. A Variety of Images

Mark Baker and Joel Green represent a second approach to making sense of the wide range of atonement images that we find in the New Testament. They contend that no single image can be favored over the others. In *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*, Baker suggests that just as the New Testament writers drew out the "salvific significance" of Jesus' death from a variety of images within diverse cultural settings, so too different contexts today require different images in order to effectively communicate the atonement (Baker, 16). While Baker and Green's critique of a popularized caricature of penal substitution must be read within this missional concern, the harshness of their critique leaves the impression that this view could be set aside. Although Baker does not sanction any one image, his examples of how to articulate or contextualize the meaning of the atonement within a particular setting also run the risk of selecting only one or two images in isolation from the others.

Mark Baker, ed., *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

3. Multiple Complementary Images

There is still a third approach to making sense of the variety of atonement images, one that is modeled by the New Testament writers themselves. In several passages dealing with the atonement, not only do the biblical writers use a range of images, they use them in the same

context! They present a multifaceted view of the atonement that incorporates multiple complementary images. The meaning of the death of Jesus is a reality greater than any one image, and requires all the images together in order to understand. The point is not which image is central or which image is most applicable in a given context—the point is that only through the use of multiple images are we even able to begin to grasp the significance of the atonement. We need all the images together.

Romans 3:22b-24; 5:9-10 - For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now **justified** by his grace as a gift, through the **redemption** that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a **sacrifice of atonement by his blood**, effective through faith...Much more surely then, now that we have been **justified by his blood**, will we **be saved** through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we **were reconciled** to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we **be saved** by his life.

Ephesians 1:7; 2:13, 15-16 - In him we have **redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses**, according to the riches of his grace...But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been **brought near by the blood of Christ**...He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and **might reconcile both groups** to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

Colossians 1:13-14, 20-22; 2:13-15 - He has **rescued us from the power of darkness** and **transferred** us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we **have redemption, the forgiveness of sins**...and through him God was pleased to **reconcile to himself all things**, whether on earth or in heaven, by **making peace through the blood of his cross**. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now **reconciled in his fleshly body through death**, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him...And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when **he forgave us all our trespasses**, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. **He disarmed the rulers and authorities** and made a public example of them, **triumphing over them in it**.

1 Peter 1:18; 2:24 - You know that **you were ransomed from the futile ways** inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the **precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish**...He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, **free from sins**, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds **you have been healed**.

C. Suggestions for Exploring the Significance of the Multiple Atonement Images

I'd briefly like to suggest several directions regarding how we can understand the significance of these multiple images of the atonement. These suggestions are:

1. Recognize the over arching themes common to the multiple atonement images.
2. Explore the depth of meaning of the particular atonement images.
3. Discover aspects of the atonement we tend to neglect or miss.

1. Common Themes

First, it is helpful to recognize the overarching themes that are common to the multiple atonement images we encounter in the New Testament. These themes are like threads that tie these images together. Common themes reveal the central concerns of the New Testament writers regarding atonement since they are not limited to a single image. Here are only several

examples. The biblical references are not intended to be an exhaustive list, but illustrative of the themes I wish to highlight. I've also not focused on the Old Testament.

a. God's Love

God's love for humanity permeates the pages of the Bible. It is God's love for people that is behind the death of Jesus on the cross. God initiates his plan of salvation, while we are still sinners, before anyone is able to respond. This is not a picture of God being appeased first before he will respond with forgiveness. Rather God himself takes action by demonstrating his love for us in a way that is unfathomable.

John 3:16 - For **God so loved the world** that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Romans 5:8 - **God proves his love for us** in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Ephesians 3:4-5a - But God, who is rich in mercy, **out of the great love with which he loved us** even when we were dead through our trespasses...

1 John 4:10 - In this is love, not that we loved God but that **he loved us** and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

b. Christ Died for Us

Another common theme that runs throughout the New Testament is that Christ died on our behalf. We refer to Jesus' death as a substitutionary atonement. The incarnation is a critical aspect of the atonement, because Jesus took on human form and was thus able to die and deal with the problem of sin and evil. Jesus did not die for a select few, but for many— for the entire world. And when Jesus died, he not only died for us, that is for our benefit, but he also died instead of us. Jesus took on the penalty and consequences for our sin and he paid the price for our freedom.

John 1:14 - And the **Word became flesh and lived among us**, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Romans 8:3 - For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by **sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh**, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,

Philippians 2:7-8 - ...but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, **being born in human likeness. And being found in human form**, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Hebrews 4:15 - For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who **in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.**

Mark 10:45 - For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to **give his life a ransom for many.**

Mark 14:23-24 - Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is **poured out for many.**

Romans 8:23 – he who did not spare his own Son but **gave him up for us all.**

2 Corinthians 5:14-15 - For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that **one has died for all**; therefore all have died. And **he died for all**, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

1 Timothy 2:5-6 - For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, **who gave himself a ransom for all**—this was attested at the right time.

Hebrews 9:28 - so Christ, **having been offered once to bear the sins of many**, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

1 John 2:2 - and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins **of the whole world**.

Romans 5:6, 8 - For while we were still weak, at the right time **Christ died for the ungodly**...But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners **Christ died for us**.

1 Corinthians 15:3 - For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that **Christ died for our sins** in accordance with the scriptures,

2 Corinthians 5:21 - For our sake **he made him to be sin who knew no sin**, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Titus 2:14 - He it is who **gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity** and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

1 Peter 3:18 - For Christ also **suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous**, in order to bring you to God.

c. The Blood of Jesus

A third theme running through the atonement texts is the blood of Jesus. While the reference to blood in many texts is shorthand for Jesus' death, it is also a clear indication that Jesus' death is to be understood as a sacrifice. What I want to highlight is that the references to Jesus' blood are linked with a variety of atonement images. The references to Jesus' blood do not point to only one theme or explanation for his death. We are purchased and redeemed by his blood, ransomed by his blood, reconciled by his blood, atoned by his blood, justified by his blood, cleansed by his blood, and sanctified by his blood.

Acts 20:28 - Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he **obtained with the blood** of his own Son.

Ephesians 1:7 - In him we have **redemption through his blood**, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace

Hebrews 9:12 - he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with **his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption**.

1 Peter 1:18 - You know that **you were ransomed** from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but **with the precious blood of Christ**, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.

Revelation 5:9 - They sing a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and **by your blood you ransomed** for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;

Ephesians 2:13 - But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been **brought near by the blood of Christ**.

Colossians 1:20-22 - and through him God was pleased to **reconcile** to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by **making peace through the blood of his cross**.

Romans 3:24-25 - they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ **Jesus**, whom God put forward as a **sacrifice of atonement by his blood**, effective through faith.

Romans 5:9 - Much more surely then, now that we have been **justified by his blood**, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.

1 John 1:7 – But if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the **blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us** from all sin.

Hebrews 13:12 - Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to **sanctify the people by his own blood**.

d. The Forgiveness of Sin

The last theme I want to highlight is the frequent references to the forgiveness or removal of sin in the New Testament as the focus of the atonement. Paul can simply summarize the significance of Jesus' death by saying that "Jesus died for our sins." Yet what we need to be careful about is not to limit our understanding of the problem of sin. Just like there is a multifaceted portrayal of the atonement in the New Testament, so too the Bible depicts a multifaceted picture of sin. "Our sins" cannot be extracted from the Bible's teaching about the power of sin, the work of the evil one, and the power of death. Sin is individual moral guilt but it is also corporate. Sin is expressed in our words, our actions, our thoughts, our attitudes, and our structures (See MB Confession, Article 4). Sin affects all of God's creation. The forgiveness of our sins through the death of Christ by God's grace gives us new life and frees us to live differently within this world.

Again, a whole range of atonement images are used with reference to the forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sins is linked with justification, reconciliation, redemption, atonement, and healing. We are also cleansed and freed from our sins.

1 Corinthians 15:3 - For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that **Christ died for our sins** in accordance with the scriptures,

Romans 8:3 - For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: **by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin**, he condemned sin in the flesh...

Romans 3:22b-24 - For there is no distinction, **since all have sinned** and fall short of the glory of God; **they are now justified** by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.

2 Corinthians 5:20-21 - So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be **reconciled** to God. For our sake **he made him to be sin who knew no sin**, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Ephesians 1:7 - In him we have **redemption** through his blood, the **forgiveness of our trespasses**, according to the riches of his grace

Colossians 1:13-14 - He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have **redemption, the forgiveness of sins**.

Titus 2:14 - He it is who gave himself for us that he might **redeem us from all iniquity** and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Hebrews 2:17 - he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, **to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people**.

Hebrews 9:26 - But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age **to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself**.

Hebrews 10:12 - But when **Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins**, "he sat down at the right hand of God,"

1 John 2:1-2 - But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the **atonement sacrifice for our sins**, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 John 4:10 - In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the **atonement sacrifice for our sins**.

1 Peter 2:24 - He himself **bore our sins in his body on the cross**, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have **been healed**.

1 John 1:7 – But if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son **cleanses us from all sin**.

Revelation 1:5 - To him who loves us and **freed us from our sins** by his blood...

2. Explore the Depth of Meaning

Recognizing overarching themes that are common to the various atonement images is one way of being able to understand the meaning and significance of Jesus' death. A second direction I would like to suggest is to focus on exploring the depth of meaning found in the biblical use of one particular image. What is the meaning of justification, or redemption, or reconciliation? What is the Old Testament background to these images that helps us better understand their use in the New Testament? How do these particular images articulate the meaning of Jesus' death within the broader cultural context?

We only have time to highlight one example of what this kind of exploration could entail.

a. Jesus Death as a Sacrifice

Jesus death is clearly portrayed as a sacrifice, which recalls the Old Testament sacrificial system. Each of the atonement images finds its roots in the Old Testament, which challenges us to see the single purpose of God woven through the entire Scriptures.

John 1:29 - The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the **Lamb of God** who takes away the sin of the world!

Acts 8:32 - Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "**Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter**, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth.

Ephesians 5:1-2 - Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, **a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God**.

1 Peter 1:18 - You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, **like that of a lamb without defect or blemish**.

At first glance it may seem that Jesus' death should be identified with the Mosaic sin offering, and while this link is there, it is but only one of the connections the New Testament writers make with the Old Testament sacrificial system. In fact, Jesus' death is described as at least six different sacrifices or offerings. This calls us to mine the depths of what this means and explore its significance for our own understanding of the atonement.

Covenant Sacrifice – reflects a new covenant or relationship with God

Mark 14:23-24 - Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, 'This is **my blood of the covenant**, which is poured out for many.'

1 Corinthians 11:25 - In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the **new covenant in my blood**. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'

Hebrews 7:22 - ...accordingly Jesus has also become the **guarantee of a better covenant**.

Hebrews 9:15 - For this reason he is the **mediator of a new covenant**, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant.

Passover Sacrifice – remembering God's election and deliverance of his people

John 19:14-15 - Now it was the day of **Preparation for the Passover**; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, 'Here is your King!' They cried out, 'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!'

1 Corinthians 5:7-8 - Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For **our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed**. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Atonement Sacrifice – removes sin in order to bring people into God's presence

Romans 3:23-25 - For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a **sacrifice of atonement by his blood**, effective through faith.

Hebrews 2:17 - Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a **sacrifice of atonement** for the sins of the people.

Hebrews 9:12 - he **entered once for all into the Holy Place**, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

1 John 2:1-2 - But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the **atonement sacrifice** for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 John 4:10 - In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the **atonement sacrifice** for our sins.

Sin Offering – Jesus wipes away sin and its punishment

Romans 8:3-4 - For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, **he condemned sin in the flesh**, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 5:21 - For our sake **he made him to be sin who knew no sin**, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Offering of First Fruits – highlights the new work of Christ

1 Corinthians 15:20, 23 - But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, **the first fruits of those who have died**. . . But each in his own order: **Christ the first fruits**, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

Abrahamic Sacrifice – expresses God’s act of self-giving

Romans 8:32 - **He who did not withhold his own Son**, but **gave him up for all of us**, will he not with him also give us everything else?

Ephesians 5:1-2 - Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us **and gave himself up for us**, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

3. Discover Neglected Aspects

Finally, I wish to suggest that we need to discover aspects of the atonement we have tended to miss or overlook. Sometimes we don’t see what is right there in Scripture simply because we are not looking for it. I wish to highlight three aspects of the atonement that I don’t always hear emphasized today: God’s wrath, the relationship of the atonement with Jesus’ incarnation and resurrection, and the call for us to participate in Jesus’ death and resurrection.

a. God’s Wrath

It may seem strange at first, to include the wrath of God under this last heading, given its emphasis in the penal substitution approach. I think, however, we really don’t know what to do with the biblical teaching about the wrath of God in the midst of a culture that fails to acknowledge God. While there are probably many reasons for this, my point is that the New Testament is clear about the reality of God’s wrath. The gospel reveals the righteousness God through his offer of salvation made available in the death and resurrection of Jesus. But the gospel also reveals the wrath of God, which is both present within history and at the final judgment. What is revealed to us is not an emotional response of anger as we might envision, but God giving people up to experience the consequences of their refusal to acknowledge him. God’s wrath is not a permanent attribute of God that is part of his essential character. In fact,

God reveals himself to Moses on Mount Sinai as being “slow to anger.” Yet God’s wrath is a response to human sin and in the end God will judge humanity, each person, according to what they have done. It is in the context of this coming judgment that the gospel is good news, because God’s wrath is averted for those who put their faith in Jesus Christ. Several images relate the atonement to the wrath of God, including justification, sacrifice, and reconciliation. Jesus rescues or delivers us from the coming judgment because he already died in our place and the death he died, he died to sin, once and for all. This must surely motivate us to preach the gospel.

Romans 1:16-18 - For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith." **For the wrath of God is revealed** from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.

Ephesians 2:3 - All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and **we were by nature children of wrath**, like everyone else.

1 Thessalonians 2:16 - by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but **God's wrath has overtaken them at last**.

John 3:36 - Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but **must endure God’s wrath**.

Romans 2:5-8 - But by your hard and impenitent heart **you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath**, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. For he will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, **there will be wrath and fury**.

Ephesians 5:6 - Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things **the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient**.

Colossians 3:5-6 - Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these **the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient**.

Romans 5:9 - Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be **saved through him from the wrath of God**.

1 Thessalonians 1:10 - and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who **rescues us from the wrath that is coming**.

1 Thessalonians 5:9-10 - **For God has destined us not for wrath** but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

b. Relationship of the Atonement with Jesus’ Incarnation & Resurrection

Another aspect of the atonement that needs to be explored further is the relationship of Jesus’ death to the incarnation, his life, and his resurrection. Jesus’ death cannot be extracted from the larger work of God through Christ. Jesus’ incarnation, death, and resurrection are all one package. God’s exaltation of Jesus through the resurrection was the focus of much of the apostles’ preaching in the book of Acts. In fact, Paul states that Christ’s death is ineffective

without the resurrection. We are not simply saved from our sin; we are saved to live new lives as disciples of Jesus. Jesus' life then becomes the model for how we are to live.

1 Corinthians 15:16-18 - For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. **If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.** Then those also who have died in Christ have perished.

c. Christians' Participation in Christ's Death and Resurrection

The last aspect I wish to highlight is Paul's recognition that Christians also participate in Christ's death and resurrection. While this may not at first glance seem to fit into our understanding of the atonement, Paul's claim that we have been crucified with Christ points to the ongoing implications of Christ's death for our lives. Sin no longer has power over us because we have experienced the effect of Christ's death and resurrection. These texts push us to connect our conversation about discipleship more closely with the atonement.

Romans 6:5-11 - For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. **We know that our old self was crucified with him** so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 2:19-20 - For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. **I have been crucified with Christ;** and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Galatians 5:24 - And those who belong to Christ Jesus **have crucified the flesh** with its passions and desires.

Galatians 6:14 - May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which **the world has been crucified to me,** and I to the world

Colossians 2:20; 3:1 - **If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe,** why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?... So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

D. Conclusion

In conclusion, I sometimes think that Scripture is like a lake (we don't talk much about the ocean in the prairies!); we can drink from its water and swim around in it but it's a little difficult to hold in our hands while standing on the shore. My point is, "Get into the water!"

The biblical writers use multiple images to describe the atonement, which must not be read in isolation from one another. Held together these images defy a limited view of the atonement that reduces the gospel of Jesus Christ to less than what it is. As Mennonite Brethren we need to continue to do the hard work of carefully reading Scripture and allowing it to shape our explanation and teaching of the atonement as well as to test our perspective and confront our complacency. The challenge before us is not to swim alone, but to enter into the Scriptures together, as careful listeners to the Spirit speaking through the text and one another.

The biblical text also challenges us to connect the dots between what we believe and what we do. Our attempt to understand how Jesus' death on the cross saves is really a call to proclaim the meaning of the cross. Paul reflections in 2 Corinthians 5 highlight three aspects of God's work of reconciliation.

See I. Howard Marshall, "The Meaning of 'Reconciliation,'" in *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology*, edited by Robert A. Guelich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 117-132.

2 Corinthians 5:18-21-

All this is from God,
who reconciled us to himself through Christ,
and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;

that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them,
and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

**So we are ambassadors for Christ,
since God is making his appeal through us;
we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.**

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin,
so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 6:1-2 - As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you." **See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!**

First God initiates reconciliation through Christ's death. This action takes place prior to any human response. God reconciles the world to himself and does not count their trespasses against them because Christ was made to be sin on the cross. There is now no barrier to the establishment of a relationship with God. Reconciliation is already accomplished on the cross.

Second, is the ministry of reconciliation, which has been entrusted to the church. We have been given the task to proclaim the good news of what God has done. This proclamation is also an appeal to accept God's initiative of reconciliation: be reconciled to God. How can people respond if they have not heard?

Third, God's action of reconciliation is unfinished until there has been the acceptance of God's grace. We are called to repent of our sin and put our faith in Christ in order to experience peace with God.

The meaning of the atonement for us is the message of the cross for the world. We can do no less than preach Christ crucified.

Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith (1902)

II. Concerning Sin and Redemption

11. Concerning redemption we believe, that man can be redeemed from the curse of eternal death, the wages of sin, and the wrath of God, only through the one eternal and sufficient redeeming and atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the lamb of God; and by His grace only are we justified without works, and He only is the ground of our choosing, renewing, and sanctification.

Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith (1975)

4. Salvation by Grace

We believe that there is one Mediator between God and men, the Man Jesus Christ. The purpose of His coming was to redeem man from the judgment and power of sin and to reconcile him to God. Through the shedding of His blood, Christ provided the one sufficient sacrifice for sin and established God's New Covenant.

We are saved by the grace of God through faith in Christ. The Holy Spirit, through the Word of God, convicts man of his sin and need for salvation. Those who repent of their sin and trust in Christ as Savior and Lord receive forgiveness. By the power of the Holy Spirit they are born into the family of God and receive the assurance of salvation. Saving faith involves a surrender of the will to Christ, a complete trust in Him, and a joyful obedience to His Word as a faithful disciple.

Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith (1999)

5. Salvation

God's Initiative

We believe that God is at work to accomplish deliverance, healing, redemption, and restoration in a world dominated by sin. From the beginning, God's purpose has been to create for himself a people, to dwell among them and to bless them. Creation and all of humanity are without hope of salvation except through God's love and grace. God's love is fully demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

God's Plan

Throughout history, God has acted mightily to deliver people from bondage and draw them into a covenant relationship. Through the prophets God prepared the way of salvation until finally God reconciled the world to himself by the atoning blood of Jesus. As people place their trust in Christ, they are saved by grace through faith, not of their own doing, but as a gift of God. God forgives them, delivers them from sin's bondage, makes them new creatures in Christ, empowers them by the Holy Spirit and seals them for eternal life. When sin and death are finally abolished and the redeemed are gathered in the new heaven and the new earth, God will have completed the plan of salvation.

Humanity's Response

Though Jesus entered a world ruled by sin, he chose not to submit to its allure and broke its domination. Through his obedient life, his death on the cross and his glorious resurrection, Christ triumphed over Satan and the powers of sin and death, opening the way for all people to follow. Convicted by the Holy Spirit, people turn from sin, entrust their lives to God, confess Jesus Christ as Lord, and join the family of God. All who receive Christ are born again, have peace with God, and are called to love one another and live at peace with their neighbour. Those whom God is saving no longer live for themselves, for they have been set free from sin and called to newness of life.

17. Christianity and Other Faiths

Jesus Is the Only Way

We believe that the saving grace of God in Jesus is the only means of reconciling humanity with God. Although salvation is available to all, only those who put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ have the assurance of eternal life.

God's Universal Witness

God has not left anyone without a witness to the Creator's goodness and power. Due to human rebellion, people have chosen to suppress the truth. While elements of truth may be found in other religions, Scripture warns against false teachings. Christians treat people of other faiths and philosophies with respect, but lovingly and urgently proclaim Christ as the only way of salvation for all peoples.

Sovereignty of God

God loves the world and does not want anyone to perish. In sovereign grace, God may communicate with people in ways that are beyond human comprehension. The Bible teaches that those who reject the gospel are under divine judgment; the eternal destiny of those who have never heard the gospel is in God's hands. Our task is to proclaim Christ as the only way of salvation to all people in all cultures. The Judge of all the earth will do what is just.