

Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Christ's Saving Work, Session 4, Introduction, Part 4, History of the Atonement Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Peterson, Christ's Saving Work, Session 4, Introduction, Part 4, History of the Atonement, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This source presents a lecture by Dr. Robert Peterson on the history of the doctrine of the Atonement, the saving work of Christ. The session explores various historical views, starting with Gregory of Nyssa's analogy of the "baited fishhook" and the Western motif of ransom to Satan, contrasting it with the Eastern emphasis on deification as seen in Athanasius. The discussion then moves to Anselm's objective satisfaction view, which focused on God's honor, and Abelard's subjective moral influence theory. Finally, it examines the Reformers, Luther and Calvin, highlighting their emphasis on penal substitution and the satisfaction of God's justice through Christ's sacrifice, setting the stage for examining later theological developments.

**2. 18 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of
Dr. Peterson, Christ's Saving Work, Session 4 – Double click
icon to play in Windows media player or go to the
Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link
there (Theology → Theology, Peterson → Christology).**



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3. Briefing Document: Peterson, Christ's Saving Work, Session 4, Introduction, Part 4, History of the Atonement

Briefing Document: The History of the Doctrine of the Atonement (Dr. Robert A. Peterson)

Overview: This document summarizes the key themes and important ideas presented by Dr. Robert A. Peterson in Session 4, Part 4 of his teaching on Christ's Saving Work, focusing on the historical development of the doctrine of the Atonement. Peterson traces the evolution of understanding the atonement from early church fathers through the Reformation, highlighting key figures and their contributions, as well as identifying problematic interpretations.

Main Themes and Important Ideas:

1. Early Church and the "Ransom to Satan" Motif:

- Peterson begins by discussing the dominant motif in the Western church, which was the idea of a "ransom to Satan."
- He uses **Gregory of Nyssa** as an example, an Eastern father who surprisingly employed this Western motif. Gregory's analogy of redemption as a "baited fish hook" is highlighted: *"in order to ensure that the ransom on our behalf might be easily accepted by him who required it, the deity of Christ was hidden under the veil of our nature, that is, Jesus' humanity, that so, as with ravenous fish, the hook of the deity might be gulped down along with the bait of the flesh, and thus light might vanish."*
- Peterson critiques the idea that the ransom was paid to Satan and the notion of God deliberately deceiving the devil, stating, *"scripture does not imply, never says, that the ransom is paid to anyone, not even to God. Certainly, it wasn't paid to the devil."*
- However, Peterson acknowledges some good in the ransom idea, noting that *"Christ's death is a ransom,"* referencing Mark 10:45. He clarifies that the cross is directed toward Satan and demons, not as a payment, but as a destruction and judgment of their power (John 12:31, Colossians 2:15, Hebrews 2:14). *"So the cross is directed toward Satan and demons, but not as a ransom or something owed them, but rather as a destruction of them, as a judgment toward them."*

- **Origen** is mentioned as another early figure who viewed the atonement as a victory over evil powers.

1. Eastern Emphasis on Deification (Theosis):

- Peterson contrasts the Western "ransom" motif with the Eastern emphasis on "deification" (theosis).
- **Athanasius** is presented as a key Eastern father who articulated this theme. He believed that humanity was corrupted by death, and deification overcomes this. *"The Western tradition follows Saint Augustine, who said we were condemned. It was legal language. ... In the East, it was on corruption and death, and deification overcomes that..."*
- Athanasius argued for Christ's deity based on the soteriological argument: *"For the word, for the son to save us, he had to be God. Only God can save us. If he is not God, we are not saved."*
- He saw the incarnation as essential for deification: *"Athanasius wrote that he indeed, the word, assumed humanity that we might become God."* Peterson clarifies this does not mean becoming God in essence but participating in God's "energies" (attributes manifested in time and space), referencing 2 Peter 1:4.

1. Objective vs. Subjective Views of the Atonement:

- Peterson introduces the distinction between objective and subjective views of the atonement.
- **Objective views** emphasize what Christ did for us *outside* of us.
- **Subjective views** emphasize what Christ did *within* us, how his cross moves us inwardly.
- He asserts that both are true but criticizes making the cross *chiefly* or *solely* interior as weak.

1. Anselm of Canterbury and the Satisfaction Theory:

- **Ann Selmán (Anselm)** is presented as a pivotal figure who emphasized the "objective satisfaction view" of the atonement in his work *Cur Deus Homo*.
- Anselm shifted the focus of the atonement from a Satan-ward direction to a **God-ward direction**, arguing that sin dishonored God. *"Anyway, that's what he did, and he regarded the major result as the dishonor of God. Now, that is a major*

improvement in the doctrine of the atonement, right, because the major thing is not us, but God again, and the work of Christ is going to influence God."

- He rejected the ransom to Satan idea. *"So, instead of ransom to Satan, which he rejected out of hand, God judges Satan. He doesn't buy him off. He owes Satan nothing."*
- Anselm argued that only God, in the person of the God-man (Jesus Christ), could make sufficient reparation for the dishonor caused by sin. *"No one, quote, but God can make the satisfaction. Man cannot redeem man. No one ought to make it except man. That's beautiful. It is necessary for a God-man to make it."*
- He introduced the dilemma of *"out satisfactio, out poena, either satisfaction or punishment,"* with God graciously accepting Christ's satisfaction instead of punishing humanity.
- Anselm emphasized that it is *"fitting"* for God to uphold his justice and character, not due to external compulsion but internal consistency.
- Peterson highlights the enduring importance of Anselm's work, which combined the person and work of Christ, emphasized Jesus' deity and humanity as essential for salvation, and stressed the Godward direction of the cross.

1. **Peter Abelard and the Moral Influence Theory:**

- **Abelard** is presented as taking a virtually opposite, "subjective moral influence theory" of atonement, criticizing Anselm.
- Abelard saw the main function of the cross as a demonstration of God's love to break down our fear and distrust of God. *"For Abelard, the main thing was our fear and distrust of God. The main function of the cross is to work as a moral influence, a demonstration of God's love to break down our fear and distrust of God."*
- Peterson critiques this as insufficient, arguing that *"the main thing is Jesus died to put away sins by his own blood, and he died to propitiate God so that we might be forgiven."*
- Abelard is labeled as the "father of modern, moral influence or exemplarist theory," where Jesus is seen chiefly as an example. Peterson clarifies that while Jesus is an example for Christian living, he is not the example of how to become a Christian, and this view is not atoning.

1. The Reformation: Luther and Calvin:

- The Reformers, **Martin Luther** and **John Calvin**, are presented as improving upon Anselm's work.
- They correctly identified that it is God's **justice**, not merely his offended honor, that is satisfied through Christ's death (Romans 3:25-26). *"They correctly said it is not God's offended honor that is repaired or satisfied. It is his justice that is satisfied."*
- They understood the atonement not as either satisfaction or punishment, but as *"divine satisfaction through punishment of the Son of God."*
- **Luther** is described as having a vast body of work on the cross, intimately bound with justification by grace through faith (Galatians 3:13). He emphasized Christ's work as Redeemer, bringing us from Satan to God, death to life, and sin to righteousness, making satisfaction and paying what we owed with his precious blood.
- Luther held two dominant views of the atonement: **Christus Victor** (victory over evil) and **penal substitution**. *"Paul Althaus says correctly that Luther has two dominant views of the work of Christ... Christus Victor, penal substitution."*
- **Calvin** is seen as more systematic than Luther, expounding Christ's work as mediator (prophet, priest, and king) in his *Institutes*.
- Calvin clearly stressed the necessity of the incarnation and taught **penal substitution**, emphasizing that Christ took Adam's place to obey the Father, present our flesh as satisfaction, and pay the penalty we deserved. *"Calvin clearly stressed the necessity of incarnation and clearly taught penal substitution. He wrote, quote, that a man who, by his disobedience, had become lost should pay the penalties for sin."*
- Calvin highlighted the transfer of guilt to Christ and the assurance of reconciliation with God through penal substitution. He affirmed that God's judgment was satisfied by Christ's blood, reconciling God's mercy and justice through propitiation.

1. Looking Ahead:

- Peterson concludes by stating that the next session will examine the views of the heretic Socinus and the Dutch theologian Grotius, as well as the modern period.

Quotes Highlighting Key Points:

- **(Gregory of Nyssa on the "baited fish hook"):** *"in order to ensure that the ransom on our behalf might be easily accepted by him who required it, the deity of Christ was hidden under the veil of our nature, that is, Jesus' humanity, that so, as with ravenous fish, the hook of the deity might be gulped down along with the bait of the flesh, and thus light might vanish."*
- **(Peterson on the ransom not being paid to Satan):** *"scripture does not imply, never says, that the ransom is paid to anyone, not even to God."*
- **(Peterson on the cross as judgment against Satan):** *"the cross is directed toward Satan and demons, but not as a ransom or something owed them, but rather as a destruction of them, as a judgment toward them."*
- **(Athanasius on the goal of the incarnation):** *"Athanasius wrote that he indeed, the word, assumed humanity that we might become God."*
- **(Anselm on the dishonor of God):** *"he regarded the major result as the dishonor of God. Now, that is a major improvement in the doctrine of the atonement, right, because the major thing is not us, but God again, and the work of Christ is going to influence God."*
- **(Anselm on the necessity of the God-man):** *"No one, quote, but God can make the satisfaction. Man cannot redeem man. No one ought to make it except man. That's beautiful. It is necessary for a God-man to make it."*
- **(The Reformers on the object of satisfaction):** *"They correctly said it is not God's offended honor that is repaired or satisfied. It is his justice that is satisfied."*
- **(Luther on Christ becoming a curse):** *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us."*
- **(Calvin on penal substitution):** *"Accordingly, our Lord came forth as true man and took the person and nature of Adam in order to take Adam's place in obeying the Father, to present our flesh as the price of satisfaction to God's righteous judgment, and in the same flesh to pay the penalty that we deserved."*
- **(Abelard on the moral influence):** *"For Abelard, the main thing was our fear and distrust of God. The main function of the cross is to work as a moral influence, a demonstration of God's love to break down our fear and distrust of God."*

- **(Peterson's critique of Abelard):** *"Ah, the main thing is Jesus died to put away sins by his own blood, and he died to propitiate God so that we might be forgiven."*

Conclusion:

Dr. Peterson's lecture provides a concise overview of the historical development of the doctrine of the atonement, highlighting the transition from early ideas like ransom to Satan and Eastern deification to Anselm's pivotal satisfaction theory and the refinements brought by the Reformers with their emphasis on the satisfaction of God's justice through penal substitution. He also critiques the subjective moral influence theory represented by Abelard, emphasizing the objective and God-centered nature of the atonement. The lecture sets the stage for further exploration of later theological developments.

4. Study Guide: Peterson, Christ's Saving Work, Session 4, Introduction, Part 4, History of the Atonement

The History of the Doctrine of the Atonement: A Study Guide

Quiz

1. Describe Gregory of Nyssa's analogy of the baited fish hook in relation to the atonement. What is one positive aspect of his understanding of Christ's death?
2. According to the lecture, why is the idea of the ransom being paid to Satan problematic? How does scripture describe the direction of Christ's victory on the cross?
3. Contrast the emphasis of the Western and Eastern traditions regarding the effects of the Fall and the means of overcoming them. Provide the name of a key figure for each tradition.
4. Explain the difference between objective and subjective views of the atonement. Why does the lecturer argue against making the cross solely a subjective matter?
5. What was Anselm's major contribution to the doctrine of the atonement, and what imagery did he use to explain it? Why was this considered a significant improvement?
6. Summarize Anselm's argument for why only the "God-man" could accomplish atonement. What two options did Anselm present regarding sin, and which did God choose?
7. How did the Reformers, specifically Luther and Calvin, build upon Anselm's understanding of the atonement? What did they emphasize regarding God's justice?
8. Briefly explain Abelard's moral influence theory of the atonement. Why does the lecturer critique this view as the primary understanding of Christ's work?
9. According to the lecture, what are the two dominant views of Christ's work emphasized by Martin Luther? How does the lecturer use Luther's sermon on Good Friday to illustrate this point?
10. How did John Calvin view Christ as a mediator, and how did he emphasize penal substitution in his understanding of the atonement?

Quiz Answer Key

1. Gregory of Nyssa likened the deity of Christ to a hook hidden by the bait of Jesus' humanity. The devil, like a ravenous fish, would be drawn to the bait and be caught on the hook of Christ's divinity, leading to the vanishing of death. A positive aspect is his recognition that Christ's death is a ransom.
2. The lecture states that scripture does not explicitly say the ransom is paid to anyone, especially not to Satan. Instead, scripture portrays the cross as directed toward Satan and demons as a destruction and judgment of their power, rather than a payment.
3. The Western tradition, following Augustine, emphasized the condemnation resulting from the Fall, while the Eastern tradition, represented by Athanasius, focused on corruption and death. The West saw legal condemnation as the primary issue, overcome by Christ's satisfaction, whereas the East emphasized the need for deification to overcome corruption and death.
4. Objective views of the atonement focus on what Christ did for us outside of ourselves, while subjective views emphasize the internal impact of Christ's work within us. The lecturer argues against solely a subjective view because it weakens the objective reality of Christ's atoning sacrifice for sin and propitiating God.
5. Anselm's major contribution was shifting the focus of the atonement from Satan to God, emphasizing the dishonor humanity brought to God through sin. He used feudal imagery of a lord being dishonored by a serf, arguing that satisfaction was needed to repair God's offended honor.
6. Anselm argued that only God could restore the damage done by sin, but it was fitting for a human to make the satisfaction. As the "God-man," Christ fulfilled both requirements. Anselm presented the dilemma of either satisfaction or punishment, and God graciously chose to accept the satisfaction provided by his Son.
7. The Reformers agreed with Anselm's emphasis on God's justice but specified that it was God's justice that was satisfied through the punishment of the Son on the cross, rather than merely his offended honor. They emphasized divine satisfaction through Christ's penal substitution.
8. Abelard's moral influence theory posits that the primary purpose of Christ's death was to demonstrate God's love in order to break down our fear and distrust of Him, serving as a moral example. The lecturer critiques this view because it

diminishes the atoning nature of Christ's death for sin and neglects the necessity of propitiation.

9. The two dominant views of Christ's work in Luther's theology are *Christus Victor* (Christ's victory over Satan and death) and penal substitution (Christ paying the legal penalty for our sins). The Good Friday sermon illustrates penal substitution by stating that God requires payment and sacrifice by his Son to remit punishment and wrath.
10. Calvin viewed Christ as a mediator who, being both God and man, fulfills the offices of prophet, priest, and king to accomplish atonement. He clearly stressed penal substitution, stating that Christ took humanity's place to obey the Father, offer his flesh as satisfaction to God's judgment, and pay the penalty deserved for sin.

Essay Format Questions

1. Compare and contrast the "ransom to Satan" motif with Anselm's satisfaction theory of the atonement. What were the key theological concerns driving each perspective, and why did Anselm's view represent a significant development?
2. Discuss the Eastern Orthodox concept of deification in relation to the atonement, as presented in the lecture. How does it differ from Western understandings of salvation, and what are the biblical foundations cited to support this view?
3. Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of Abelard's moral influence theory of the atonement. In what ways might this theory resonate with contemporary audiences, and what are the key theological objections raised against it?
4. Explore the ways in which the Reformation, particularly the theologies of Luther and Calvin, both affirmed and built upon the medieval understanding of the atonement, especially concerning the concepts of justice, satisfaction, and punishment.
5. Evaluate the lecturer's assertion that a comprehensive understanding of the atonement requires recognizing both objective and subjective dimensions of Christ's work. Provide examples from the historical figures discussed to support your argument.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Atonement:** The work of Jesus Christ by which he brought reconciliation between God and humanity through his life, death, and resurrection.
- **Ransom to Satan:** A historical motif, particularly in the early Western church, suggesting that Christ's death was a ransom paid to Satan to redeem humanity from his bondage.
- **Deification (Theosis):** A concept in Eastern Orthodox theology referring to the process by which believers become more like God and partake in the divine nature through grace.
- **Objective Atonement:** Views of the atonement that emphasize what Christ accomplished outside of the believer, such as satisfying God's justice or defeating evil powers.
- **Subjective Atonement:** Views of the atonement that emphasize the internal impact of Christ's work on the believer, such as moral influence or the breaking down of fear and distrust.
- **Satisfaction Theory:** Anselm's view that Christ's death provided satisfaction to God for the dishonor caused by human sin, restoring God's honor and justice.
- **Penal Substitution:** The doctrine that Christ died in the place of sinners, bearing the punishment and penalty of God's wrath that they deserved.
- **Moral Influence Theory:** Abelard's view that the primary purpose of Christ's death was to demonstrate God's love and serve as a moral example, influencing humanity to love and trust God.
- **Christus Victor:** A motif emphasizing Christ's victory over the powers of evil, including Satan, sin, and death, through his death and resurrection.
- **Mediator:** Christ's role as the go-between or bridge between God and humanity, reconciling the two through his person and work.

5. FAQs on Peterson, Christ's Saving Work, Session 4, Introduction, Part 4, History of the Atonement, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions: The History of the Doctrine of the Atonement

1. What was the "ransom to Satan" motif in the early church, and what is problematic about it according to the source?

The "ransom to Satan" motif, prevalent in the Western church and notably articulated by Gregory of Nyssa in a more extreme form, suggested that Christ's death served as a ransom paid to the devil. Gregory of Nyssa infamously likened this to God using Christ's humanity as bait on the hook of his deity to catch the devil. While this motif correctly identified Christ's death as a ransom (referencing Mark 10:45), it incorrectly implied that the devil had a legitimate claim or right to this ransom. The source argues that Scripture never states that a ransom was paid to anyone, least of all the devil, and that the cross should be understood as a victory and judgment *over* Satan and demonic powers (John 12:31, Colossians 2:15, Hebrews 2:14), not a payment *to* them. The "deception" aspect, as described by Gregory, where God tricks the devil, is also rejected as outrageous and not biblically supported.

2. How did the Eastern Church's understanding of atonement differ from the West in the early centuries?

The source indicates that while the West predominantly focused on the "ransom to Satan" motif (though often without the deceptive elements), the East emphasized the concept of **deification** (theosis). Represented by figures like Athanasius, this view centered on the idea that Christ assumed humanity so that humanity might partake in the divine nature, overcoming the corruption and death that resulted from the fall. While the West, influenced by Augustine, emphasized the legal consequences of the fall (condemnation and guilt), the East focused on the ontological consequences (corruption and death), with deification as the remedy. The West tended to emphasize the cross and Christ's sufferings, while the East highlighted the incarnation and the resurrection as the defeat of death.

3. What is Anselm of Canterbury's contribution to the doctrine of the atonement, and why is it considered a major development?

Anselm, in his work *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man), significantly shifted the focus of the atonement from a Satan-ward direction to a **God-ward** one. He rejected the ransom to Satan idea and argued that sin primarily dishonored God. Justice required that this dishonor be repaired through **satisfaction**. Anselm posited that only God, through the God-man Jesus Christ (who is both fully divine and fully human), could provide this sufficient satisfaction. He emphasized that Christ's death was a voluntary act of obedience to God's will and that it outweighed all sins, satisfying God's justice so that he could mercifully forgive humanity. This was a major development because it centered the atonement on God's character and the need for his justice to be upheld, rather than on a transaction with the devil.

4. What is the "satisfaction view" of the atonement as articulated by Anselm, and how did the Reformers later refine it?

Anselm's satisfaction view argued that sin dishonors God, and to restore this honor, satisfaction is necessary. Since humanity is incapable of offering sufficient satisfaction, God, in his grace, provided his Son, Jesus Christ, the God-man, to offer this satisfaction through his death. The Reformers, while building upon Anselm's foundation, refined this view by emphasizing that it is not merely God's offended *honor* that is repaired, but his **justice** that is satisfied. They articulated this as **penal substitution**, where Christ, by his death on the cross, bore the punishment that sinners deserved, thus satisfying God's just demands. The Reformers also clarified that it was not a dilemma of "either satisfaction or punishment," but rather "divine satisfaction *through* the punishment of the Son."

5. What is Abelard's "moral influence theory" of the atonement, and what are its key tenets and criticisms?

Peter Abelard promoted the "moral influence theory" of the atonement, which emphasized the **subjective** impact of Christ's death. According to this view, the primary purpose of Christ's suffering and death was to demonstrate God's immense love for humanity, thereby softening human hearts, breaking down fear and distrust of God, and inspiring moral transformation. While the source acknowledges that Abelard raised valid questions about certain aspects of earlier atonement theories and that Christ's death does demonstrate God's love and can have a moral influence, it strongly criticizes making this the *sole* or *chief* purpose of the atonement. The main criticism is that it downplays or neglects the objective aspects of the atonement, such as propitiation

(appeasing God's wrath) and expiation (atoning for sin), and does not adequately address the problem of God's justice in the face of human sin.

6. How did Martin Luther and John Calvin understand the atonement, and what were their key emphases?

Both Martin Luther and John Calvin, central figures of the Reformation, understood the atonement in terms of Christ's substitutionary sacrifice. Luther emphasized that Christ redeemed humanity from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (Galatians 3:13). He highlighted both the **victory** of Christ over Satan and death (Christus Victor) and **penal substitution**, where Christ made satisfaction for sin and paid what we owed to God. Calvin, known for his systematic theology, also clearly taught the necessity of the incarnation and penal substitution. He explained that Christ, as true man, took humanity's place to obey the Father and to bear the penalty for sin, satisfying God's righteous judgment. Both Reformers stressed that God's grace and love initiated the atoning work of Christ and that justification comes through faith in his sacrifice. While Luther's presentation was often more connected to preaching, Calvin provided a more coherent and systematic exposition of these themes.

7. What is "penal substitution," and why did the Reformers consider it a crucial aspect of the atonement?

Penal substitution is the theological doctrine that Jesus Christ, in his death on the cross, took the legal penalty for humanity's sin, satisfying the demands of God's justice. The Reformers considered this doctrine crucial because it provided a clear explanation of how God could be both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26). They argued that because God is righteous, sin cannot go unpunished. Christ's substitutionary death, where he bore the Father's wrath and the punishment due to sinners, provided the necessary satisfaction for God's justice, allowing for the forgiveness and reconciliation of humanity. This doctrine offered believers assurance of their reconciliation with God, as their guilt was imputed to Christ, and his righteousness was imputed to them.

8. Why is it important to consider the historical development of the doctrine of the atonement, according to the source?

Considering the historical development of the doctrine of the atonement is important because it reveals how different theological traditions and thinkers have grappled with understanding the central event of Christian faith – the saving work of Christ. By examining various motifs and theories throughout history, such as ransom to Satan, deification, satisfaction, and moral influence, we can gain a richer and more nuanced appreciation for the multifaceted nature of Christ's atoning work as presented in Scripture. The source suggests that while some historical interpretations may have limitations or even errors, they often contain valuable insights and highlight different aspects of the atonement. Understanding this history helps us to avoid overly simplistic or one-dimensional views and encourages a more comprehensive grasp of what Christ accomplished through his life, death, and resurrection.