



A Community Called Atonement

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Over the centuries the church developed a number of metaphors, such as penal substitution or the ransom theory, to speak about Christ's death on the cross and the theological concept of the atonement. Yet too often, says Scot McKnight, Christians have held to the supremacy of one metaphor over against the others, to their detriment. He argues instead that to plumb the rich theological depths of the atonement, we must consider all the metaphors of atonement and ask whether they each serve a larger purpose.

A Community Called Atonement is a constructive theology that not only values the church's atonement metaphors but also asserts that the atonement fundamentally shapes the life of the Christian and of the church. That is, Christ identifies with humans to call us into a community that reflects God's love (the church)--but that community then has the responsibility to offer God's love to others through missional practices of justice and fellowship, living out its life together as the story of God's reconciliation. Scot McKnight thus offers an accessible, thought-provoking theology of atonement that engages the concerns of those in the emerging church conversation and will be of interest to all those in the church and academy who are listening in.

A Community Called Atonement Details

Date : Published August 1st 2007 by Abingdon Press

ISBN : 9780687645541

Author : Scot McKnight

Format : Paperback 177 pages

Genre : Religion, Theology, Church, Christianity, Ecclesiology, Nonfiction

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Joshua Butler says

i really liked this book alot, i found it insightful and pastorally helpful. he is really constructive and irenic in the justification conversations going on between the reformed and emergent conversations, i particularly liked the way he elaborated the distinct emphases for atonement in the gospels (passover), paul (justice court), early church (christus victor), etc. and the emphasis that atonement is not something done primarily between the individual and God (one of the unfortunate individualistic emphases in the modern period) but rather God's drawing of a community into union with himself through the work of Christ. i also agreed his framework of "identification for incorporation" was a solid one for encompassing the various strengths and important highlights of the various models.

Bryan says

An excellent treatment of how to deal with the various historical atonement theories (use all of them). I thought that the "communal" aspects of atonement dealt with in the final part of the book was the best and most valuable part and also most demonstrated why all the historical theories are together needed in the reconciling work of God for humankind. The book is short but I felt was every bit as valuable as some longer "atonement" books I read recently by N. T. Wright and Peter Leithart, so don't let its brevity make you think it is lacking in substance.

David Campton says

This started so well... The editor's preface had claimed that the series to which this book belongs offered "approachable theology" suitable for church small groups... Scot's own prologue offered a helpful analogy of why we need multiple metaphors for the atonement, and the title suggested that the language with which we express our theology (particularly our theology of the atonement) significantly shapes our relationships within the church and with the wider world...

However, it all fell apart pretty fast... The further I got into it the less it seemed to be accessible to those without the "benefit" of a university-based theological education. At the same time, I felt that Scot was simplifying things in unhelpful ways, e.g. conflating some atonement metaphors e.g. recapitulation/ransom and Christus Victor obscuring their distinctive emphases, strengths and shortfalls. But I thought that all this would pay off as he explored, for me, the key issue of how our theology of atonement does or should shape our Christian community and its relationship with the wider community. But the pay-off never came... Indeed the last section, exploring atonement in terms of "Missional Praxis" was very thin... each section being little more than a few sentences... And these got thinner and thinner as the end approached... with the last chapter on liturgical expressions of this, almost reading like a set of notes for a much more developed piece... It was almost as if the editor had been breathing down his neck, and he had finished it in a hurry. The editor's preface promised that this series would not offer a 400 page monograph... but although I wouldn't have wanted a 400 page theologically dense textbook, perhaps a 400 page book would have been a more realistic way to explore this issue in the depth, breadth and colour that it deserves... and which Scot McKnight is more than capable of providing...

There were glimmers of what might have been... his emphasis on atonement being the restoration of the image of God within us was very helpful... and perhaps might be the metaphor for the moment, in a world obsessed with image (although his insistence on using the word Eikon as a theological shortcut was unnecessarily obfuscating and alienating to the non-theologian). As such I hope that he returns to this subject, freed from the artificial constraints of this "Living Theology" series, to explore it more fully, especially in terms of its implications for the shaping of Christian community...

John says

There was much to disagree with in this book, such as the flattening out of the offense of sin to not be fundamentally against God, but everyone and everything. Therefore, what follows is not a theory of atonement that is the basis or fundamental to every other theory, but that each theory is equally as fundamental. The analogy McKnight often uses is a golf bag. You can't play a round of golf with one club (read, Penal Substitutionary Atonement), but you need all your clubs. Rather, the more biblical understanding, as I see it, is that PSA is the basis for every other theory, since I understand all sin being fundamentally and primarily against God and consequentially against everyone else.

McKnight does a good job of being sympathetic and fair-minded to more conservative evangelicals – though he at times falls into the trap of arguing against the lowest common denominator of his opponents, making many confessional and traditional Christians out to be floppy-haired evangelists.

But when McKnight is good, he is really good. He is often moving when talking about the cross. And he doesn't shy away from talking about the effects of sin, wrath, and the need of a substitute (though, as noted above, it's just not fundamental.) His insights into the gospel narratives (especially Mark) are wonderful and his writing style is very enjoyable.

There are lots of qualifications before I suggest the book, but I suggest it nevertheless.

Jeremy says

This book took me off guard because the Intro (or maybe Forward) talked about this being a book in a series of accessible, non-theologically heavy, small group usable books. While not Calvin's Institutes, this was most certainly a theological work, full of terminology like perichoresis, eikon, praxis, etc.

After adjusting my expectations, I thoroughly enjoyed this work. McKnight challenges the reader to broaden their concept of atonement, not by watering it down, but by seeing it in its' full context. He is arguing for not just adopting one theory or analogy of atonement but rather synthesize them into a cohesive view of what atonement means, what atonement does, and what atonement calls us to.

My only complaints are that at times it felt like he was massaging passages or topics to fit them into his construct (and these were the aspects of his argument that I most disagreed with) and that either the author or the editor seemed to have lost steam by the time the book got to the application phase. I'd rather have the

theological ponderings be more brief and the application be more robust.

If you'd like an articulate, thorough, and at least seemingly orthodox take (there are times that an entire chapter makes total sense but the way he sums it up sounds off) on the main thrust of the New Perspectives on Paul and the Emergent Church, I think this is the place to look.

Paul Patterson says

This book is an incredibly comprehensive analysis of Atonement theories which reaches past doctrine into praxis. Scott is informed by an emergent and post-modern friendly approach that doesn't endorse any one of the traditional views of Atonement but seeks to integrate all of them into an incorporative model. His homey example from golfing is helpful. He says that the game of golf is hobbled if one were to use just one club - it takes many clubs to play the various settings your ball may land in. So too with the atonement theories where using the most helpful theory for the human situation is demanded.

One limitation as I see it is that when he discusses the penal justification/ransom theory he doesn't mention to whom the ransom is paid. This leaves the theory open to many problems including a misrepresentation of God as putting his holiness and justice above his love and grace. Scott himself seems to favour the use of the recapitulation theory or the incorporative participative model as particularly significant for our era - it is akin to a bad in which to hold the other theories. In his closing chapters emphasis is stressed on the atonement as a community practice including justice, mission, scripture reading and sacraments. Well worth reading!

Adam Ross says

Despite a number of major flaws (on which more anon) this was a really good and important book. If more in the emergent/emerging movement wrote stuff like this, I would feed a whole lot better about the movement as a whole. Alas, instead we get McLaren.

At any rate, this book argues that no one view of the atonement does justice to Jesus' death on the cross, but that instead He did them all. They are all necessary to our understanding of the cross, but that none may claim an absolute or "central" position. Jim Jordan has pointed out the three important themes of Scripture are forgiveness of sins, holy war against Satan, and maturation into glory - and that none are "central" but that rather all are central. Each of the three classical views of atonement match with each element of Jordan's observations. The penal substitution gets our sins forgiven, the Christus Victor view matches with the climax of holy war against Satan, and Abalard's view of the cross as our example (which is really closer to the cross as something to which we are "impressed" "shaped" "stamped" and "conformed to" by the Spirit) is a match with the idea of maturation into glory. But that's not in the book, that's just me thinking out loud.

Not only does the book seek to bring together all of the major atonement theories, but McKnight manages to do so reasonably and solidly under the theme of "union with Christ." "I suggest that we think about atonement as *identification for incorporation*" (107). In other words, Christ identified Himself to us in order that we might have our sins removed and receive His righteousness - and all through incorporation into "union" with Christ's body.

But he is not content to leave atonement there, but rather points to the understanding of the New Testament

and the early Church Fathers that atonement was not merely something that happened to me in a single moment of time, but actually creates a community of atoned-for ones who are to extend atonement to the world (1 Cor. 5:18-20). "atonement is something done not only by God for us but also something we do with God for others. . . . atonement is praxis" (117). "The work of God is to form a community in which the will of God is done and through which one finds both union with God and communion with others for the good of others and the world" (119).

There are several problems with the book. Chapters 5 and 6 are pretty obnoxious, being an appalling approach to metaphor in which McKnight argues that each view of the atonement is really a metaphor that tries to communicate something that was going on behind each theory. He'd be better off to say that each view of the atonement is a dimension, or aspect, of Christ's work on the cross. The way it is its just going to confuse and hinder.

A second problem is in his discussion of the New Perspective on Paul (much of which is helpful). It really is more of a problem I have *with* the New Perspective that McKnight agrees with them on. He repeats the old divide between justification as "getting in" and "staying in" the covenant, but this is really like saying justification is about "being" unified with Christ, not "how" one is unified with Christ. Framed in this way, the whole distinction is nonsense. Justification is about *both* getting in and staying in union with Christ.

Chapter 18 started as a stinker too, although some good things were said in the second half. He leads the charge against "Bibliolatry" or the "tendency for some Christians to ascribe too much to the Bible" (143). Funny, that. Pretty sure it's the *Word* of God. You know, a manifestation of Jesus. At any rate, he gets the progression utterly backwards and argues (essentially) that the church *precedes* Scripture, rather than the orthodox view, which is that the Scripture, as the Word of God "breathed" by the Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16) creates the Church, who then attests to the power of the Word.

Anyway, in light of the oodles of positives with the book these are important but tangential points. Atonement is identification for incorporation, and, as he argues in the final chapter, the identification of us with Jesus occurs at baptism (Rom. 6) and our incorporation into Christ is nourished in the Lord's Supper, *so that* we might carry atonement into the world as the community of the atoned-for ones. And that is a glorious thing.

Bart Breen says

I read this book at the recommendation of Frank Viola, co-author of *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ* and found it to live up to the recommendation.

Scot McKnight is commonly associated with the emergent church movement and this book is indeed the opening volume of a series from that community. The material itself, however, stands well on its own and it provides a very strong and very practical look at the atonement that will serve anyone, from any tradition or background, to see the panorama of the atonement and how it is understood throughout all of Christian History and across many Christian communities.

Lest anyone imagine that this is just a book of theology and history that operates in the intellectual realm McKnight keeps things very much rooted in the practical and speaks of how these truths tie into daily expression and community as a whole.

The primary theme of the book finds its expression in human beings as "cracked eikons" or the marred image of God within us. The atonement as the restoration of mankind is a constant theme as well with the multiple metaphors of scripture looked at with a caution against adopting any one of the them as the "master theme" to the diminishing or exclusion of the others. Of particular value to this reviewer was the examination of Penal Substitutionary Atonement (PSA). PSA tends to be at the core of most reformed, evangelical and fundamentalist theology and practice and it has been a particular target of many who see it as offensive and exclusionary. Instead of dismissing it out of hand or accepting it as it is popularly applied, McKnight takes a conciliatory tact viewing it in balance with several other metaphors within the Bible and reminding the reader that the metaphor is not the things itself.

This combined with a similar handling and familiarizing of the reader with the different themes and metaphors allows for a very rich appreciation of the atonement and it's beauty. Add to this that McKnight brings in as well an element often skimmed over in other venues, that being the title theme of the community and it's tie-in through Pentecost.

All in all, Frank didn't steer me wrong. This is a beautiful, educational, practical and inspiring thematic work that anyone, coming from any Christian tradition should come away from with a deeper appreciation of their own tradition as well as expand their understanding of others and perhaps even temper their understanding to see how pervasive the atonement is in all areas of life, fellowship and community.

5 stars.

bart breen

Marty Solomon says

This book is unbelievably helpful. So helpful, in fact, that it overcomes all of the nuances that I disagree with to get a fourth star.

First of all, the book's leading metaphor is worth the price of the book alone. McKnight talks about how we have been arguing over which atonement theories are the best, rather than realizing that we are often unfair to them in isolation (creating straw man critiques) and not realizing that they are like a bag of gold clubs — you need to know when and how to use each one.

Having said that, this is NOT a book on the different theories of atonement. This is a book on the larger ideas that drive atonement. Towards the end of the book, McKnight's summary treatment of the New Perspective on Paul (as it relates to atonement) was one of the best I've read.

He ends the book by pointing out something that needs to be written on by more people. He says that atonement is also a work that the community of God engages in and he speaks to the praxis of atonement. While I didn't enjoy every chapter in that section (I particularly thought the chapter on the Word of God was problematic and created too many false dichotomies), it was very useful.

Overall, I would say that no in-depth study on atonement would be complete without reading (maybe starting) with this book.

Kyle says

In *A Community Called Atonement*, McKnight suggests that modern discussions about the atonement are too narrowly focused. Using the analogy of golf, he suggests that we need a golf bag that can hold the various clubs (atonement metaphors) so that they can each be used in the appropriate circumstances. The analogy is helpful, as is his defense of his position. Reading the New Testament (not to mention OT precursors), I have always found it difficult to fit the view of authors into any one category. Penal substitutionary atonement? Certainly. Always? I don't think so. Christus victor? It's hard not to find that in 1 Corinthians 15. And so on. McKnight's discussion was persuasive and helped me bring together into a more unified theology certain things I already saw in Scripture but couldn't place well into a coherent view of atonement. McKnight ultimately argues for a golf bag that he calls identification for incorporation. I conclude with a passage from the book that I think nicely sums up much of what McKnight is saying throughout: "That is, the gospel itself is an ecclesial, atoning work: it works to create a community in which cracked Eikons are healed in their relations with God, self, others, and the world. Herein is the telic heart of atonement: God provides atonement in order to create a fellowship of persons who love God and love others, who find healing for the self, and who care about the world" (121).

Amy Young says

Recommended by Karl Helvig ... and he said, "It is in a series called "Spiritual Theology" and he does a fantastic job of tackling some really significant aspects of Atonement Theology without going way beyond an approachable level."

So glad I read this! In a nutshell, atonement should touch every aspect of life (relationship with God, others, self, and systems). Interesting take on the place/role of scripture

Father -> Son -> Spirit -> Church -> Scripture

We read scripture not to know scripture better but to know God better. Scripture in and of itself doesn't make a person a better Christian (sadly this reality is played out by some pastors and Bible teachers the world over). Knowing, loving, serving and getting to know our God, that is the role of scripture.

Benjamin Vineyard says

A Community Called Atonement
By Scot McKnight
A Book Review

I read McKnight's book hoping to hear another helpful voice for piecing together the theology of God making all things new. What I discovered was that McKnight offers a good, accessible read on the subject - a book that's as much informative as accessible.

The greatest theological take away was written toward the front of the book. The goal of atonement,

McKnight says, is God uniting himself to a community of people who join God in reuniting and reconciling all things in creation.

How this reconciliation and redemption works is best seen through the incorporation of all the major atonement theories, seeing that the problem of separation from God is much larger than personal moral failure.

I originally began reading the book hoping for a clear “this atonement theory over that” answer; McKnight’s call for incorporation of all theories in order to see the greater picture of God’s saving work in Jesus initially felt dismissive of the struggle and perhaps a little Hegelian, middle-of-the-road-ish. But, I think he's on to something.

The greatest take away from the book was how McKnight described and dissected the penal substitution theory of atonement, dismantling the “God as child abuser” sense of it and pitching the idea that unless this theory is examined a little deeper than it's often presented, people will only see a bipolar God who doesn't know whether to be filled with rage or love when he comes face to face with sin.

That's a necessary invitation I think.

Heather Goodman says

Powerful book that looks first at traditional theories of atonement and brings them together to show how they address sin to bring us into relationship with God, self and others, then second looks at atonement as praxis, or as the mission of the church, a community commissioned by God to love one another in a unifying fellowship and to joining God in his reconciling work of atoning the world and thereby bringing justice.

My one qualm: in his introduction and a bit throughout, McKnight can use terms and language that seems to stereotype generations of Christians and in so doing, compartmentalize and separate them. I think this distracts from his message in his book. I know this book is from Abingdon Press' Emergent Village series, and indeed, it follows a lot of postmodern approach to theology, but to say even this, I believe, presents false dichotomies of approaches to theology and church practices. I found that so much of what I agree with comes from my upbringing by what postmodernists would call modernist theologies. I fear that these types of categories gets in the way of helpful theological dialogue.

Still, I highly recommend this book.

Heather Harding says

"God provides atonement in order to create a fellowship of persons who love God and love others, who find healing for the self, and who care about the world. "

I love the focus of atonement on the healing of the community, instead of only focusing on the individual.

Tim says

A wonderful overview of atonement in Scripture and in church history that sorts through the various details and offers McKnight's best definition of the meaning of atonement. For him atonement is "identification in order to remove sins and victory in order to liberate those who are incorporated into him so that they can form the new community where God's will is realized.... He identifies with us all the way down to death in order that we might be incorporated into him. To be incorporated 'in Christ' is not only a personal relationship with Jesus Christ but also a personal relationship with his people."

This quote shows McKnight's centering on union with Christ as the primary means of understanding atonement, with other theories, including penal substitution filling out the image, but not forming its backbone. The quote also shows the centrality of a community, a people called to be obedient to God's will, to his understanding of atonement (hence the book's title). A great basic work that left me wanting more.

Alan says

I found the title a bit murky, but I'm glad I gave it a try. This book's a gem.

McKnight demonstrates how to use various metaphors for the atonement in a most generous way. Here's a radical idea: rather than using our pet theory to form a distorted view of Christian doctrine, and as a weapon against other theories, how about using them together as a set of tools -- McKnight prefers to see them as a set of golf clubs! -- to form a comprehensive understanding of sin, our human condition, and the atoning work of Christ?

The generous manner in which this book is written is as valuable to me as its theological content. It's taught me to lighten up about atonement theory.

The final section looks into praxis. It's not earth-shaking stuff, but very good: God's atonement should make the church, all parts of it, missional. He cleverly notes that 2 Timothy 3:16 says a lot more about the missional orientation of scripture than it does about inspiration: "...so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."

Blake Chenoweth says

When I think of the word "atonement" my mind automatically goes to the cross of Jesus, and that is okay. Scot McKnight opened it up and helped me to see how Jesus' birth and so much more should be a part of our atonement theology. He used the metaphor of a golfer using several different clubs to play a round of golf, but when we only talk about atonement with the cross it is like playing that round of golf with only one club.

It had a huge impact on me thinking of living this atonement out as well with the people in my world. We are to participate in the atonement that Jesus did and that was a blessing to read. We are called to live in a community, a community of atonement if you will. My one gripe on this book is I think it could even be shorter than the 170 pages it is. He tends to repeat a lot of what is said throughout the book, but it is good for some people. I loved this book though and think it will be one that I go back and read again some day. Blessed me greatly.

