

WHAT IS THE ATONEMENT?

by Richard D. Phillips

TO THE GROUP LEADER: This resource is designed to help you lead others to better understand one of the “Basics of the Faith” booklets published by P&R. The numbers in brackets indicate the page number in the booklet. Below each question is an answer based on what the author presents, or advice on how to discuss the question. You have the freedom to adapt the questions to best fit your group.

A good teaching technique is to distribute the questions to the group and have them write down how they would answer BEFORE reading the booklet. After reading, members can refine their answers based on their reading. As a group, members can discuss their views to affirm or modify what they wrote.

1. Why did Jesus *have* to die? Was there no other way? (5-7)
Ask the group what they wrote before they read the booklet, but don't let them get too much into the subject just yet.
2. How do you understand the word “atonement”? How important is the meaning of atonement to our salvation? (7-8)
Read the last line of the middle paragraph on page 8: “In short, the biblical doctrine of the atonement lies at the center of all saving truth and holds together all essential Christian doctrines.”
3. Read Genesis 3:14-21. Where is the atonement most clearly seen here? (8-10)
God took the life of an innocent animal and *covered* the sin and guilt of Adam and Eve.
4. What was the **first** thing Jesus' atoning death had to accomplish? (10-13)
The answer to this is almost always, “my salvation,” but that is not the case. Before God, in His love, could offer to us salvation, His wrath (His extreme anger at our sin) had to be satisfied. Jesus' death accomplished that.
5. How do you explain God's love for us if He is so angry at our sin? (10-13)
He did not create man to destroy him. He created us to love us and have a close and personal relationship with us. When we sinned, there was no way we could ever pay for what we had done. So God, in His great love, provided the only way – Someone else to pay what we could not.
6. Read Leviticus 14:1-4. The Bible uses leprosy as a picture of how sin deteriorates us spiritually. What does each of these birds represent? (14-16)
“The first bird died to show that a substitute would pay the penalty for our sins – Propitiation. Then the live bird...depicted our complete forgiveness from sin as it flew away out of sight.” (15)
7. In Psalm 103:12, why does God say “as far as the east is from the west,” and not, the north is from the south?
If you go far enough to the north you start to go south. But there is no end to going east or west.
8. Define the word *redemption*. If you are older, you might have an interesting memory of “redeeming.” (16-20)
Older folk will remember redeeming stamps they saved for gifts they wanted. Dr. Phillips mentions three things a person might be redeemed from: military defeat, indebtedness, and slavery to sin. Bring out the connection of this last one to the subject of atonement.

9. Another aspect of atonement is reconciliation – the restoring of relationships. At the Fall, in Genesis 3, there were five relationships that were broken:
- Spiritual – our relationship with God was broken
 - Psychological – our relationship with ourselves was broken
 - Sociological – our relationship with each other was broken
 - Ecological – our relationship with the creation was broken
 - Physiological – our relationship with our bodies was broken

In Christ's atonement, we have been reconciled in all five of these broken relationships. They are not yet perfect, but the atonement's healing begins at salvation. It will be completed in our glorification.

10. If God is so loving and truly just, why couldn't He just forgive us without Jesus' sacrificial death? (21-30)
It is precisely because God is just He must punish sin. All sin is personal. It is not like breaking a human law, where we simply pay a fine and move on. Breaking God's law personally attacks His character. His holy nature requires punishment. His tremendous love is therefore shown in Jesus' willingness to suffer for our offenses.
[SUGGESTION: Unless your group is very astute theologically, it is suggested you focus on the section on page 27-29, making sure they understand PSA rather than spending a lot of time on the other theories – unless they can handle them.]

11. Did Jesus' death pay for **ALL** sin, or just some? (30-34)

After reading the booklet, do you still stand by your answer?

Keep in mind, this is the most difficult part of the 5 points of Calvinism for people to accept. Be gentle with them, helping them to see the inconsistencies in any answer except that Jesus paid only for the sins of the elect.

After going through these questions, read the text and fill in the answers in preparation for class, noting other questions you might have. [By the way, if you do have any other questions about what you read, write them down here so you remember them at class time.]

APPLICATION

- As a church** – Dr. Phillips gives three very good and helpful ministry applications (34-43). Break into small groups and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of what your church is doing now. Then, make a plan how you can improve in each of these areas.
- Personal** – You have been reading the most wonderful message ever to be presented to mankind. From now on, when you pray, begin with thanking and praising God for doing everything you could not do to bring about your salvation and the wonderful relationship that developed as a result?

For Further Study

Atonement, Gabriel N.E. Fluhrer, editor. P&R, 2010.

Christ's Redemption, Sandy Wilson (The Gospel Coalition Booklet Series). Crossway, 2011.

Sin and the Fall, Reddit Andrews, III (The Gospel Coalition Booklet Series). Crossway, 2011.

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