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## Understanding Atonement

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**Did Jesus really have to die?** God can do anything, so why couldn't God just forgive without the cross? These are questions about "the atonement." This is a word that we don't often use; and the meaning and the doctrine of the atonement are not easy to grasp either. But, as we are now in the season of Lent, it is a good time to think about the meaning and significance of the cross, and how it "atones" for our sin.

First, we ought to consider how God views sin. Our culture has trivialized morality, making things that are "right for me, wrong for you", and vice versa. Therefore in our times, sin often does not seem like a very big deal, and something that God could just overlook. But even slight offences in our minds are active rebellious actions against God. God hates sin; it is detestable to him. As a result, sin separates us from God because sinfulness cannot be in his presence. Sin is a serious business.

So, knowing that God hates sin, we can see God cannot simply forget it exists. God in this righteousness has a necessary reaction against evil. If God ignored evil, it would be inconsistent with who he is. He needed to find a solution.

**This is where Jesus on the cross comes in.** For those who have been Christians for a long time, we are very used to this idea that "Jesus died for my sin." But, this is really not so simple. The medieval theologian Peter Abailard could not accept such a cruel action from a loving God. He wrote, "How cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should in any way please him that an innocent man should be slain—still less that God should consider the death of his Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world!" And, if we think about God sending an innocent person into the world just to have that person sacrificed for others, then Abailard's protest does make sense.

However, he is missing a very important fact. **God did not send someone else to do his job—he went himself!** This idea raises some complicated questions about the nature of the Trinity, but nonetheless, we know that Jesus is God, and God came to earth to save sinners. We should not imagine God the Father as a cruel dictator commanding Jesus to do his bidding. God the Son and God the Father act together in the atonement.

In Scripture, Jesus clearly indicates that he is voluntarily giving himself up. In John 10:17-18 Jesus says, "I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." Can the death of Jesus be seen as a cruel act when God suffered that death himself voluntarily? I do not think so.

Last year, I did a series of sermons on "Images of the Atonement." **The New Testament explains the work of Jesus on the cross in several different ways.** It talks about Jesus as the perfect Passover Lamb—the final sacrifice. The Bible also uses financial images— Jesus pays our debt, or pays our ransom. The Bible talks about being freed out of slavery. It talks about our adoption as sons and daughters into God's family. All of these are different images of the atonement.

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# Understanding Atonement continued

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And, one of the most common atonement images is a court of law. This translates very well into our culture, since we are familiar with the basic proceedings of a courtroom. As sinners, we stand guilty before God our judge. But, the guilt and the punishment for which we were liable are given to Christ. In order to transfer our punishment, Christ stood trial before a judge and received capital punishment as a criminal on earth.

Yet, this still might not sound quite right to us because in our courts, the guilty are not allowed to simply transfer their sentence to a willing innocent person. This is also a problem with the atonement. But, we have to remember that it was not just any old person to take our sentence, but the sentence was transferred to the Judge himself. The judge is allowed to declare a different solution. And, God declared Himself the guilty one because his justice demanded a guilty sentence for sin. The Bible tells us that God can indeed make this kind of substitution. II Corinthians 5:21 says, *“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

**Now, we are more equipped to answer the first question we raised: did Jesus have to die?** As sinful humans, we cannot stand in the presence of a holy God. Nor are we able to save ourselves from our sin. Ultimately, animal sacrifices cannot remove this penalty either. A human penalty must be paid because only a human can pay the price for humanity. Only an innocent person can remove the penalty of the guilty. So it had also had to be God. Only Jesus as fully human and fully God can meet these criteria. **This is the only way for us to find salvation.**

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## Council News

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- For several years, we had supported **New City Church**, a church plant in Kansas City under the leadership of Pastor Ryan Pelton. Council learned that they are now ready to “organize” and become an official Christian Reformed Congregation. Council has helped with the application process, and Classis Heartland has now approved and has welcomed them as a new church in our classis.
- **Evangelists Bob and Brenda Holtrop** continue to work in Omaha. They are working on an Alpha program for new Christians, and Bob also is involved with Brothers in Blue prison ministry. They now work independently, and Bob has let us know they are still working on filing Missio Dei as its own 501-3c. Council plans to transfer their fund-raising money once this is completely set-up. This is not what we hoped for when we partnered with Bob and Brenda, because we called them to plant a new Christian Reformed congregation, but our hope and prayer is that God will bless them in their future ministry.
- **The church safety team** is now moving forward with a few new ideas. In the next month or two we will be re-keying the church and getting that all set-up for a smooth transition. We are also going to set-up a safety volunteer for Sunday mornings that will probably take the place of our current usher system with a few more specific duties and better training.
- It was not working well to have our shepherding elders join the Stephen Minister meetings. Instead, Pastor Dan, Vicki and the 2 shepherding elders will meet together for **“Care-giver meetings”** every 4-6 weeks to discuss specific care-giving issues in the congregation.

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## News from Director of Congregational Care

—*Vicki Vandergriend*

Good afternoon PLC family. I am writing this while enjoying a beautiful warm morning and a cup of coffee. As I look back at the past year it is exciting to see the relationships and care that has been developing and occurring.

Please let me know if you or someone you care about is facing a difficult period in their life. A Stephen's minister might be a great blessing as they could walk along side of the care receiver's on the painful journey. One Stephen's minister said recently "wow, this ministry really works!".

I would love to know if anyone is interested in starting a triad. I have a few members who have expressed interest. Just let me know. You could say that a "tri-ad" is a small small group. 3 people is ideal, but maybe it is just 2 or 4. A tri-ad is for mentoring, accountability and discipleship.

Have a wonderful March and find some way to enjoy each day. Even if it's as simple as enjoying a cup of tea or coffee on a beautiful day.