



Openness Theology

Part 3: What Did Christ Really Do At The Cross?

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Acts 2:23 “. . . this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.”

Acts 4:27-28 “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your Holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, . . . To do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.”

I wasn't actually going to write this article. Then I stumbled on to open theism's distorted doctrine on the death of Christ and decided that I should slip this in before we move on to deal with the subject of "God's Omniscience and Suffering" (see part 4).

If you go back to the September column, you will notice that this article **is** included as one to appear in the coming months. That is because I added this subject to the list before that was printed.

I wrote the first two before it occurred to me that I needed to write this one. I didn't see it coming. According to open theists, neither did God.¹

The Quest for a Manageable Deity

The problem with the "open" view of God is not just that it strips Him of His knowledge and sovereignty, but that in the end, it makes Him something He is not.

Open theists are on a quest to find a manageable deity. In reality, they have made a god after their own likeness. This god does not know the future and does not control all events or sovereignly decree anything that might infringe upon the free will of man which they hold to be sacred.

It should come as no surprise to us that they would fail to understand other essential doctrines as well. Once the nature of God is up for grabs, it is never long before other doctrines follow suit. Indeed, the Pandora's box of openness theology has been opened.

Open theists are quick to fashion for us a God that is not the judgmental, angry, wrathful, holy, righteous and totally just God of the Scriptures. Instead we get a God whose over-riding attribute is His love. They attempt to rid God of all of His divine attributes which seem to them to be harsh or severe.

According to open theists, God's love overwhelms His wrath and displeasure over sin. His goodness makes void His justice. God is not a God who should be feared and revered. We are left with a kindly, non-threatening, heavenly valet.

The Attack on the Atonement

Not only are God's foreknowledge and sovereignty discarded in the paradigm of openness theology, but the doctrine of the atonement suffers a blow as well.

Openness theology teaches that sin is merely "an inability for God and humans to interact to the extent possible."² Sin is characterized as a "broken relationship rather than a state of being or guilt."³

Scripture tells quite a different story. Scripture says we are "**dead in our trespasses and sins**" and "**children of wrath**" (Eph. 2:1-3; Col. 2:8), "**excluded from the life of God**" (Eph. 4:8), "**without hope**" and "**without God in the world**" (Eph. 2:12), "**under sin**" (Rom. 3:9), "**helpless at the time Christ died for the ungodly**" (Romans 5:6),

¹ See the previous 2 articles: *God under Attack!!!* and *How Smart is Your God?* for an overview of the proponents and teachings of openness theology. Past issues of this column are archived on our website at www.kootenaichurch.org.

² Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994) 173-175.

³ *Ibid*, 105.

“enemies of God” (Rom. 5:10), “at enmity with God,” and “unable to please God” (Rom. 8:7-8).

In open theism, man is not really dead, only sick. Man is not really hopelessly lost and unable to save himself, but instead, man is able by an act of his own will to save himself and mend the broken relationship. Man is not really an enemy of God, but just has a broken relationship, much like you might have with your wife after she burns your supper.

So in the world of the open theist, God is not a holy God who must punish sin. He is not really wrathful over sin and does not demand a payment for it. There is no justice, holiness, or righteousness in God that must be appeased, only love. God is able to forgive without demanding a payment for sin.⁴

So much for **Hebrews 9:22** - “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”

Well, if God does not demand a payment for sin then what did Christ do? John Sanders, leading openness teacher, describes the cross as God’s willingness to “suffer the pain, foregoing revenge in order to pursue the reconciliation of the broken relationship.”⁵

Gone is any discussion of propitiation, satisfaction, judgment, expiation of wrath, and the payment of a ransom for sin. And why not? After all, if man is able by the exercise of his own free will to save himself, what do we need the cross for?

Are you starting to see how the sacred cow of freewill theism is the altar on which nearly every tenet of the Christian faith is being sacrificed? First, the foreknowledge of God (and thus His deity) and now the work of Christ on the cross. After all, if the nature of God is marred beyond recognition to preserve the free-will choices of man, why not the atonement as well?

Man’s salvation becomes not the result of the grace of God which sovereignly saves sinners, but rather the work of men in choosing to be saved. No sacrifice is necessary and we are left with a works-based salvation in open theism.

What Does Scripture Teach?

The Scriptures teach that the death of Christ was a **penal substitution**.

By “penal” we mean that Christ’s death on the cross was a just punishment for sin. One of the words that the

Scriptures use to speak of the work of Christ on the cross is *propitiation*. A propitiation is a satisfaction of the divine wrath against sin. When we say that God is propitiated we mean that His wrath has been satisfied. Once His wrath against sin has been satisfied, He can be propitious (favorably inclined) to us.

Romans 3:25 says that Christ was “displayed publicly as a propitiation.” **Hebrews 2:17** tell us that Christ was made a High Priest in order to “make propitiation for the sins of the people.” **1 John 2:2** says that Christ is the “propitiation for our sins,” and **1 John 4:10** says God “sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

God’s wrath toward sin had to be satisfied. Justice had to be done. Sin had to be punished. God was the offended party. Because of sin, the “wrath of God is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness” (**Rom. 1:18**). Hell is the eternal judgment upon the infinite sin against an infinitely holy God. Hell is God’s justice on display.⁶

Romans 5:9 says that “having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.” Christ came to take that wrath on our behalf. On the cross, Christ paid the price for our sin. He took the divine wrath for sin in our place. As the prophet Isaiah said, “The chastening for our wellbeing fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed” (**Isaiah 53:5**). Jesus said that the “Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom [payment] for many” (**Mark 10:45**).

That leads us to the teaching on the death of Christ being *substitutionary*. Remember, it is a **penal substitute**.

The death of Christ is not just an example of how much God loves us.⁷ The death of Christ is not a demonstration of what the justice of God *would* look like *if* He decided to punish sin.⁸ He was no martyr.

Rather, Scripture teaches that Christ was our substitute. He stood in our place, and took our punishment as our substitute.

“He bore our sins in His own body on the tree” (1 Pet.

6 Open theists actually deny the existence of hell. John Sanders, William Hasker and Clark Pinnock teach annihilationism or conditional immortality -the doctrine that the unsaved cease to exist at death and only the saved have an existence beyond this life.

7 This is commonly known as the moral influence theory of the atonement. It teaches that the death of Christ is only an example of God’s love, not an actual payment for sin or expiation of divine wrath. It was promoted by Peter Abelard (1079-1142).

8 This is commonly known as the governmental theory of the atonement. It teaches that the death of Christ is simply a demonstration of God’s justice, not an actual payment or punishment for sin. This view of Christ’s atonement was promoted by Hugo Grotius (1583-1645).

4 This is another way in which openness theology adheres to the doctrines of the 16th century socinian heresy.

5 Pinnock, 105.

2:24). Hebrews says that **"He bore the sins of many"** (Heb. 9:28). **"Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law having become a curse for us"** (Gal. 3:13). God made Christ who **"knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"** (2 Cor. 5:21).

Christ died **"for our sins according to the Scriptures"** (1 Cor. 15:3). He **"died for us"** (Rom. 5:8). **"For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust"** (1 Pet. 3:18).

He is the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep (John 10:11). He is our Passover Lamb who was sacrificed for us (1 Cor. 5:7; Exod. 12). These are just a few of the many references that describe the substitutionary nature of Christ's death.

The death of Christ did not just make salvation possible. It did not just make men "savable." Rather, the death of Christ actually paid the debt and effected a reconciliation. His death saves all those who will believe in Him for forgiveness. The sin of all those who will believe in Christ, was put on Him at the cross. He suffered the punishment in our place. He bore our sins.

All the rest who will not repent, believe in Christ, and obey the gospel will bear the weight and punishment for their own sins for all of eternity in the place of eternal separation from the presence and grace of God. That is the Hell that open theists deny exists.

Typical of the liberal view of the atonement, the open theist believes that the death of Christ did not actually save anyone. It only demonstrated how much God wants to save us, or it only made salvation possible.

According to the open theist, Christ didn't need to be our sacrifice or our substitute because we did not owe a debt; there was no wrath of God to be propitiated.

It is not just the nature of God that is attacked by the errors of open theism, but the nature of the work of Christ on the cross. Open theists do not just believe in another god, but they present another gospel (Galatians 1:6-9). The rise of open theism is a grave threat to the cause of the true gospel. We must contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

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Quotable Quotes

"What made Christ's miseries on the cross so difficult for Him to bear was not the taunting and torture and the abuse of evil men. It was that He bore the full weight of divine fury against sin. Jesus' most painful sufferings were not merely those inflicted by the whips and nails and thorns. But by far the most excruciating agony Christ bore was the full penalty of sin on our behalf - God's wrath poured out on Him in infinite measure. Remember that when He finally cried out in distress, it was because of the afflictions He received from God's own hand: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34). We cannot even begin to know what He suffered. It is a horrible reality to ponder. But we dare not follow open theism in rejecting the notion that He bore His Father's punishment for our sins, for in this truth lies the very nerve of genuine Christianity. It is the major reason the cross is such an offense (1 Cor. 1:18)."

- John MacArthur, Open Theism's Attack on the Atonement, The Master's Seminary Journal (Spring, 2001), 9.