

Based on: Roger Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002.

Salvation: Objective and Subjective (chap. 11)

Salvation: Gift and Task (chap. 12)

Our discussion here will overlap with some ideas from the previous discussion, but will focus more closely on the nature of Christian salvation. The subtitles of chapters 11-12 in Olson's book succinctly state the dogma (essentials) regarding the Christian formulation of salvation, which is understood as objective *and* subjective and as a gift (grace) *and* a task (response). This seems a simple enough affirmation, but when we begin "unpacking" these statements we find a great variety of ideas and formulations. In Olson's words, "while all Christians have always agreed that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world...they have not always agreed on the details of *how* Christ saves humans" (244). Therefore, we must approach the subject with humility. Though we will inevitably formulate our particular understanding of salvation differently we must remember to extend grace to those with whom we disagree when we discuss the grace of God offered to humanity in the person of Jesus the Christ.

Let's begin with the affirmation, "Salvation is both objective and subjective." This statement asserts that Jesus the Christ is the means by which God enacts the reconciliation of humanity to Godself and humanity to one another. However, there are a variety of detailed formulations (called "models of atonement") that seek to explain how God accomplishes this reconciliation. As Olson notes, "all major Christological creeds...say that Jesus Christ is Savior, but none sets forth what Christians must believe about *how* he saves" (245). In chapter 11 we encounter two alternatives and five Christian atonement models, which we will describe briefly before turning to the affirmation of salvation as gift and task.

The two primary alternatives to the Christian atonement models are *pluralism / moral example theory* and *unification theology*. The pluralistic / moral example model suggests that the actions of Jesus were wholly subjective and provided us a perfect moral example of God's will for humanity, but also says Christ's life and teachings were not an objective necessity for salvation. In other words, nothing changed in the world because of Jesus' life and teachings. Change only happens when persons choose to follow the example Jesus set forth. Therefore, there are other paths or ways to God, and other moral exemplars that may be followed even if Jesus is set forth as a perfect example. Put simply, this theory does not simply emphasize the subjective aspect over the objective, it does away with any objective, redemptive change wrought by the life of Jesus the Christ. The second major alternative is unification theology, which derives from the ministry of Sun Myung Moon, a Korean prophet who is seen "as a latter-day messiah [who will] unify world religions and cultures by means of a philosophy known as 'the divine principle'" (253). This theology says that Jesus was crucified before he completed the work for which he came, namely to "establish a new humanity by marrying and having children purified of the Satanic nature implanted in humanity by the fall of Adam and Eve" (254). Therefore, Moon is proclaimed as the new messiah who will complete the work of Christ by having these purified children.

This brings us to the mainstream (orthodox) Christian formulations of Christ's atoning work, which are quite diverse since some emphasize the objective more than the subjective while others stress the subjective more than the objective. But you still may be wondering what we mean by objective and subjective anyway. Olson notes that the *objective* element of salvation suggests that in and through the life of Jesus "something is actually achieved on behalf of humanity by God in Christ; atonement happens outside of the individual human subject even if it remains to be realized and appropriated by him or her" (256). In other words, Christ's life and teachings change the world apart from anyone's response to them. Through the Christ event the world was forever altered. In the words of The Misfit (from Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find*), Jesus "threw everything off balance."¹ More accurately, the Christ event pointed out our imbalance and disorientation by revealing what divine balance and orientation looks like. Nothing is nor can be the same again, regardless of how we respond to the life and teachings of Jesus. The *subjective* element suggests that Jesus' life "makes possible or enables a necessary response within the human person needing salvation and that the actual benefit of Christ's death is in that response" (256). In other words, change happens when an individual responds to the life and teachings of Jesus. While all atonement models include both an objective and subjective element, they tend to emphasize one more than the other, which results in a rich diversity of formulations. The five major Christian atonement models to which we now turn are: Ransom theory (Origen); Satisfaction theory (Anselm); Moral Influence theory (Abelard); Christus Victor theory (Luther, Aulen), and Penal Substitution theory (Calvin). Each of these will be discussed here in brief.²

¹ Flannery O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 1976), 21.

² The following are helpful resources for further study on the various atonement models. Various Authors, *The Nature of Atonement: Four Views*, (IVP Academic, 2006); Stephen Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, (Liturgical Press, 2005) and *Options on Atonement* (Liturgical Press, 2007); Joel Green & Mark Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, (IVP, 2006); J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, (Eerdmans, 2001); Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor* (Wipf & Stock, 2003).

The *ransom theory* of atonement was first formulated by second-century theologian Origen of Alexandria. As Olson summarizes, Origen “proposed that Christ’s death on the cross was necessary because Satan had captured humanity due to Adam’s sin and the original sin that spread to all of his posterity and held them in bondage. Because Satan’s hold on humanity was legal, God had to deal justly even with Satan, so he paid his Son Jesus Christ to Satan on the cross in order to win back his human creatures” (256-257). Put another way, Origen understood humanity as bound to Satan by Adam’s sin (which we all inherited as descendants of Adam). Enslaved to the accuser, the evil one, or Satan, we could not be liberated unless a payment was made. This is akin to modern day ransom payments made to those who capture individuals and force their family to pay them a sum of money to secure their safe return. In sending Jesus to die on the cross, Origen asserted, payment was made to Satan securing humanity’s release from bondage. The resurrection is seen as a grand deception of Satan, who released humanity upon Jesus’ death only to find that his ransom payment vanished three days later. Olson rightly notes that this view “contains a hint of antiquated superstition” (258), as it is reminiscent of modern-day movies where an electronic ransom payment is wired (seemingly) in order to secure the safe return of the prisoner, but then disappears from the bank account afterward.

The *satisfaction theory* of atonement was first formulated in *Cur Deus Homo (Why the God-Man?)* by Anselm of Canterbury, an 11th century church theologian. Anselm based his model on the feudal system of the Middle Ages, where vassals were bound by contracts to their lords in exchange for land to cultivate. The vassals would give a portion of the crops to their lord (and often served them in other ways) in exchange for protection and continued use of the land. If a vassal dishonored their lord, the lord’s offended honor had to be satisfied or appeased by the payment of a debt. Anselm took this idea and applied it to God, saying that humanity had broken God’s contract (law) and dishonored God. Therefore, God’s honor had to be satisfied or appeased by the payment of a debt. A dilemma arose because the debt could only be paid by humanity, yet it was too great for humanity to pay. The debt could only be paid by God. Therefore, Anselm reasoned, Jesus had to come (being fully God and fully human) and die on the cross to satisfy the offended honor of God and thereby bring reconciliation between humanity (feudal vassals) and God (feudal lord). Only the God-man (Jesus), Anselm reasoned, could pay the debt owed, and thereby satisfy the offended honor of God.

The *moral influence theory* was first formulated out of a dislike for Origen’s ransom theory and Anselm’s satisfaction theory. Peter Abelard, an 11th/12th century theologian, sought to formulate a view “that would do greater justice to God’s love and include humanity in reconciliation” (258). To that end, Olson notes that Abelard “suggested that Christ’s main work of redemption on the cross was provision of a *moral influence* that changes the perspective of humanity and causes them to trust God and repent of their sins. For Abelard, God does not so much need payment of a penalty and certainly does not need to deal with the devil; God needs sinful people to repent and throw themselves on his mercy” (259). As such, Abelard understood the life and teachings of Christ as the means by which God manifested God’s love to humanity, which draws them to Godself. While this view emphasizes the subjective aspect of atonement, it tends to neglect the objective side by understanding Jesus’ life as only having a “transforming influence” (259) on humanity that enables them to turn toward God (i.e. repent).

This brings us to the theory known as *Christus Victor* (“Christ the victor”), which was first formulated by Martin Luther in the 16th century and then championed by Gustaf Aulén, a 20th century Swiss theologian. As Olson summarizes, “the heart of Christ’s atoning work for humanity [in *Christus Victor*] is his victorious invasion and conquest of Satan’s territory where humans have been held captive. It is not so much a ransom paid...as a spiritual battle” (259). In other words, Jesus enters the realm over which Satan rules (the systems / structures of evil and injustice) and overcomes them, conquering them through his life, teachings, death, and resurrection. As Aulén put it, Jesus “‘fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the ‘tyrants’ under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to himself” (259). A variation of this view has been set forth recently by J. Denny Weaver, which he has labeled *narrative Christus Victor*.³ Weaver, writing from the Mennonite (pacifist) tradition, suggests a non-violent atonement model—one in which Jesus’ death is not necessary for redemption. The cross, Weaver argues, was not required to ransom us from Satan (Origen), satisfy God’s offended honor (Anselm), or show us the love of God (Abelard). Rather, the cross is the ultimate manifestation of Jesus’ non-violent revolution, revealing that God’s Kingdom is not manifested by power over others, but by self-sacrificial love. Objectively, the life and teachings of Jesus transform the world by exposing the violent destructiveness of human systems and structures, and replacing them with a new way of life (cf. Mt 5.38-48). Subjectively, the life and teachings of Christ transform

³ J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, (Eerdmans, 2001).

individuals as they accept the seeming folly of the Kingdom manner of life, by rejecting *quid pro quo* as valid, praying for persecutors, loving enemies, walking an extra mile, and giving our shirt to those who already demanded our coat. Finally, we come to the *penal substitution theory* formulated by John Calvin, which “tweaked” Anselm’s satisfaction theory by positing that “Jesus Christ suffered the punishment humanity deserved and thus God’s righteous anger and tender love were reconciled; his wrath was assuaged and his compassion expressed. Because of his death on the cross Christ’s righteousness can be imputed to us by God just as our sinfulness was imputed to him” (260). This has become a rather widespread and popular view, so much so that many assume this is the only atonement model. Despite its prominence, for me it raises more problems than it solves, and should be carefully considered before accepting such an understanding of the atoning (reconciling) ministry of God in and through Jesus.⁴ Nevertheless, it is a well-known and widely accepted atonement model, and deserves consideration and analysis regardless of my personal feelings on the matter. What is important to remember is that this is *a* model, but not *the* model.

In the end, none of these models are perfect. They all have problems and “holes.” Therefore, we must seek to understand each as best we are able, and then compare it to what we understand Scripture to reveal regarding God’s reconciling, grace-full work in and through Jesus. Whichever model “fits” best for you should be accepted, but not in a close-minded, unbending manner. We always must be open to new insights and understandings, remembering that equally “Bible-believing,” “Jesus-loving” Christians have come to drastically different understandings of the atoning work of Jesus. Therefore, we would be wise to remember that reconciliation models need to include both objective and subjective aspects, and then take Olson’s advice to not “baptize any theologically speculative construction (theory, model) as the one and only true Christian belief to the exclusion of all other possible perspectives” (263).

This brings us to the second aspect of salvation set forth in chapter 12, namely that it involves both gift (freely given grace) and task (required response/obedience). Put another way, salvation involves grace and faithfulness, faith and works, receiving and giving. It is quite simple to say that salvation is a gift that is also a task, but it becomes quite complicated (and not a little controversial) when one starts explaining what this means. C.S. Lewis once noted the difficulty by commenting on Paul’s paradoxical statement “work out your salvation with fear and trembling as God works in you to will and to act according to his good purposes” (Philippians 2.12-13). Lewis responded by saying that “it looks as if in one sense we do nothing, and in another case we do a damned lot.”⁵ This is the difficulty we face. How is salvation a gift given by God’s grace that we can do nothing to earn, yet also a task that must be undertaken? What does God do? What does the human person do? As Olson reveals, the Christian consensus goes only so far as to affirm that “salvation as reconciliation with God and inward renewal from corruption of inherited depravity and toward the restoration of the image of God is wholly and completely as work of God’s grace while at the same time also an event and process involving human agency” (273). That much we agree upon. The precise details of the divine-human interplay in the process is widely debated, leading to a rich diversity of perspectives that will be considered here, along with two major alternative (un-orthodox) formulations.

Let’s begin with the two alternatives, which Olson identifies as Pelagianism / Semi-Pelagianism and *apokatastasis* / universalism. We first encountered the ideas of Pelagianism (named after Pelagius, a 5th century British monk, who first set forth the views) in our discussion of humanity (chap. 9). Pelagius believed that humans, of their own volition and apart from any divine assistance, could choose to always act rightly and remain pure and perfect. Though it was highly unlikely that this could ever happen, Pelagius argued that it was possible by denying that humans are born sinful. Semi-pelagianism tweaks the views of Pelagius by including the need for divine assistance, but still places the priority on human volition. A popular expression of Semi-pelagianism is “God helps those who help themselves.” In their most basic form, both pelagianism and semi-pelagianism reject the Christian consensus that God’s grace is necessary for us to repent and begin living a Jesus-looking life. The focus is on human ability and choice, at best seeing God’s grace (divine assistance) as a response to human action rather than seeing God’s grace as calling forth and enabling human action.

⁴ For an excellent summation and response to the penal substitution theory see Greg Boyd’s reply to the question “what do you think of the ‘penal substitution’ view of the atonement?” at <http://www.gregboyd.org/qa/jesus/what-do-you-think-of-the-%E2%80%9Cpenal-substitutionary%E2%80%9D-view-of-the-atonement/>.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, “Questions,” Walter Hooper, ed., (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1950), 55

The second alternative is known as *apokatastasis*, a Greek work meaning “reconstitution” or “reintegration.” It connotes restoration, setting things right, and reordering of that which has been disordered. In Christian theology, *apokatastasis* is synonymous with the more widely-known term, *universalism*. Olson notes that this view, in all of its varied manifestations, posits “belief in the ultimate, unconditional reconciliation of all humans (if not all creatures including angelic and demonic spirits) with God” (275). Put another way, it is the belief that all of creation—humanity, animals, and angelic beings—will be reconciled to God. Many theologians throughout church history have either affirmed universalism or done everything but affirm it, despite the fact that it was judged to be heretical (outside the bounds of orthodoxy) at the Second Council of Constantinople in AD 553. When asked about his thoughts regarding universalism, Karl Barth, one of the foremost conservative theologians of the 20th century, said “I don’t teach it, but I don’t not teach it.” I think what he meant was that he couldn’t defend it with airtight biblical exegesis, but he could hope for it. I think this is the safest approach when we come to a matter such as this. Rather than pejoratively dismissing universalism as “heretical,” we should sympathize with those who hold this perspective, knowing that they long for all of creation to be reconstituted and reintegrated into the designs and purposes of God who is everywhere and always working to make all things new and healed and redeemed. I, for one, find the biblical witness to be this: some will continually choose to reject God’s redemptive mission, despite God’s continual efforts to offer grace. *Nevertheless*, I can still hope that somehow, someday, by some great and mysterious grace all will be reconciled in the glorious reintegration of creation that the book of Revelation calls the new heaven and the new earth, and which Jesus called the Kingdom (rule and reign) of God.⁶

This brings us to the primary interpretations of Christian belief regarding salvation as gift and task, which can be divided into two broad categories known as *monergism* (a Greek term meaning, roughly, “the work of one”) and *synergism* (a Greek term meaning, roughly, “working together” or “joint work”).⁷

Monergism is “any belief that God is the sole sovereign agent in salvation and that even the task side of salvation is secretly and entirely the work of God in the person being saved” (277). In other words, those who hold this view see the human as entirely passive, subject to an unalterable divine will, and having no role in the process of salvation. Even the choice to accept or reject God’s grace is not really a freely made decision (as most would understand the term), because it is predetermined by God and brought to pass entirely by God’s volition. This view goes back to Augustine, but is most popularly associated with John Calvin and his followers in the theological framework known as Calvinism.⁸ The ideas of John Calvin were set forth systematically by his followers at the Synod of Dort (1618-1619), and these formulations were then popularized in the acronym T.U.L.I.P.—Total depravity; Unconditional election; Limited atonement; Irresistible grace; and Perseverance of the saints. These ideas form the core of monergism, asserting that because humanity is inherently evil and unable to do anything good (total depravity) they can only be redeemed by God’s choice (unconditional election). Therefore, Christ’s death (viewed as penal substitution—Jesus takes our place and by his death appeases the wrath of God) is only for those unconditionally elected to salvation (limited atonement). Those chosen by God cannot reject God’s choice (irresistible grace), nor can they “fall away” from the faith because they are chosen by God (perseverance of the saints). The “dark side” of monergism is that it excludes the non-elect from any possibility of redemption, apart from any freely made choice they could make because God has not chosen to redeem them. Therefore, the non-elect are (and remain) totally depraved because they have been unconditionally elected not to be saved because Christ only died for those whom God has chosen to elect to salvation. Put another way, all are unconditionally elected, some to salvation and others to damnation apart from (and prior to) any choice they could make. Both persevere in their election, one group to heaven (fellowship with God) the other to hell (separation from God).

⁶ I have been strongly influenced by the writings of C.S. Lewis in my efforts to understanding the ultimate destiny of human persons. His view is that none will be separated from God apart from their own choosing, because the doors of hell are locked from within not from without (*The Problem of Pain*). Hell (separation from God) is a choice persons continually make. God’s grace is available to all, and God wishes none to perish (2 Pet 3.9), but God will not coerce submission. Grace must be accepted, it cannot be forced. Hell is tragic precisely because it is freely chosen. Moreover, in his book *The Great Divorce*, Lewis leaves open the possibility of “post-mortem conversion” (repentance) in a mystical tale of a bus trip from hell to heaven. I highly recommend this book, because even if you disagree with his suggestions you will be challenged to think about heaven and hell in new and insightful ways.

⁷ For a dialogue on Calvinism and Arminianism see: Jerry Walls and Joseph Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist*, (IVP 2004); Robert Peterson and Michael Williams, *Why I Am Not an Arminian*, (IVP 2004); Bruce Ware, Paul Helm, Roger Olson, John Sanders, *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: Four Views*, (Baker Academic, 2005).

⁸ For a treatment of Calvinism, see Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*, (IVP, 1994).

By contrast, *synergism* is “any belief that salvation is a cooperative project and process in which God is the superior partner and the human person being saved is the inferior but nevertheless crucial partner” (277). In other words, those who hold this view see humanity as cooperating with the divine in the process of redemption. This does not mean that humans earn God’s grace, but that God’s grace is *available* to all humanity, yet it must be accepted (not resisted) in order to become *effectual*. To borrow the language of election from Calvinistic monergism, synergists would say that all are “elected” to salvation, but only those who choose to accept their “election” (that is, God’s redemptive grace) are redeemed. This view goes back to the early church fathers and was the predominant view until Augustine, but is most popularly associated with Jacob Arminius and his followers in the theological framework called Arminianism.⁹ Arminians (and all synergists) believe that God’s grace is necessary for humans to be able to freely choose to accept or reject God’s redemptive mission (clearly distinguishing synergism from Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism) apart from any prior divine decree. Therefore, there is no debate over works-based righteousness or meriting God’s favor. Arminians believe that God goes before us and makes the power of choice or free will possible (prevenient grace). Though both monergists and synergists state that every person has a choice to accept or reject God’s grace, synergists assert that our choice is not predetermined by God (even is some synergists believe that our decision is foreknown by God). For synergists, everyone is elected to salvation by God, but election is only made effectual by the grace-enabled choice to repent and turn to God. As mentioned, Calvinism also says that all are elected, but election is either to heaven or hell and persons have no choice because God has already decided the matter. In other words, election is already effectual by God’s decree apart from and prior to the person’s response. Most Calvinists say that everyone has a choice, but it is not a choice between two equally available options. We freely choose to do sin and evil, for that is our nature (total depravity). That God gives some grace to choose to repent is a mystery, and we can only be thankful. While Calvinists and Arminians use similar language and are not polar opposites, they differ on the matter of choice. For Calvinists, God’s prior determination (election to salvation or damnation) is what determines a person’s action. For Arminians, God’s going-before grace enables individuals to have freedom to choose to accept or reject God apart from any predetermined result.

The debate between monergists (Augustinians, Calvinists) and synergists (Arminians, Open theists) has been and will continue to be ongoing. Each cites biblical texts in defense of their perspective, but neither is without its problems. The best we can do is to seek to formulate our faith intelligibly by placing the life and teachings of Jesus at the center of our theological affirmations as best we know how. In so doing, we’ll inevitably come to different conclusions. Therefore, the question to ask in seeking to decide which position you agree with shouldn’t be “who is right and who is wrong?” Obviously both sides will defend their view as right and biblical and the other as wrong and (in some ways) unbiblical, so that is a fruitless endeavor anyway. The question should be “which formulation has the problems that I am able to live with?” All theological formulations are incomplete and full of difficulties. Any honest theologian will admit as much. At some point mystery must be appealed to in every theological endeavor, regardless of how well formulated it may be. Therefore, we must seek to understand the issues and then decide which perspective has the problems that we can live with and which perspective has the problems that we cannot. Finally (and, perhaps, most importantly), while there will always be great diversity regarding our understanding of salvation, Olson rightly reveals that a unifying consensus can be found in declaring “that reconciliation with God and transformation into the image of God and Christlikeness are gifts that also involve human participation—even if that participation is interpreted as a gift also. . . . What defines Christian belief in this areas is not every minute detail. . . . What defines it is belief that salvation is wholly a gift of grace. . . . and at the same time received by persons through grateful reception by repentance and faith” (286).

⁹ For a treatment of Arminianism, see Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*, (IVP Academic, 2006).