

The early church recorded the story of the passion of Christ. It is found in Matthew 26-27, Mark 14-15, Luke 22-23 and in John 18-19. Each version of the story describes what happened to Jesus following his entry into Jerusalem and ending in his crucifixion and death. The early church recorded the story because it believed that the separation between God and human beings had in some way been bridged by what the story illustrates or describes, that we and God had been reconciled.

A theory that explains how this occurs is called an atonement theory. Atonement means “amends or reparation made for an injury or wrong”. An atonement theory explains how faults or errors are removed or repaired and “at-one-ment” or reconciliation is bought about. Interestingly, it appears that the earliest church did not have a need to explain how this occurred.

It was not until the 3rd century that an actual theory appeared. The theory is called the Ransom Theory and describes how God basically tricks Satan into taking his Son into hell. Once in hell the Son is able to use his goodness and power to break Satan’s hold on the inhabitants of hell and win their release. This theory explains why the death of the Jesus was necessary.

In the 11th century another theory arose, called the Satisfaction Theory. In this theory Jesus satisfies the demands of justice by being a human sacrifice and undergoing the punishment required to pay the price for our sin. This is also known as “substitutionary atonement” in that Jesus substitutes for us by paying the price we should pay. Once the price is paid then reconciliation can and does occur. This theory offers a different explanation for the suffering and death of Jesus as being required by what the laws of justice demanded. This theory is especially effective in addressing the issues faced by people who live in a guilt-based paradigm where the problem is something that has been done or might be done and the deep need is to be punished or to atone.

In the 12th century another theory appeared called the Moral Theory. In this theory the way Jesus faces and embraces his life and death demonstrates how God and humanity reconcile. Jesus is an example for the rest of humanity to imitate, and by our following that example reconciliation with God is achieved through our involvement in and cooperation with what God is also doing. This theory approaches the suffering and death of Jesus differently, using them as a paradigm illustrating how reconciliation is achieved on an ongoing basis in the present.

In the 13th century another theory appears, known as the Acceptance Theory. In this theory atonement is achieved by an arbitrary choice made by God to simply accept and welcome us as we are. This theory is best expressed in the different stories regarding the incarnation where God

simply chooses to inhabit our life with us and work within us as we are to bring about reconciliation. In this theory the suffering and death of Jesus are not as significant as in other theories. The pivotal point here is that God simply chooses to reconcile and achieves this by inhabiting our life with us and orchestrating whatever reconciliation requires in the present. The passion stories display the lengths to which God can and does go to accompany us and remain one with us. This theory is especially effective in addressing the issues faced by people who live in a shame-based paradigm where the basic problem is not guilt over what we have done but shame over who we are, and where the deep need is for acceptance.

There are other theories which are variations of or combinations of the above.

The point of this is...depending on which of these theories a person is drawn toward, the meaning of the passion story will be different and what is important in the story will change. If we are drawn toward the Ransom Theory, the fact that Jesus died will be important, but not so much how he died. If we are drawn to the Satisfaction Theory, the suffering Jesus endured on the way to his death, as well as his death itself, will be very important. If we are drawn to the Moral Theory, how Jesus lived and how he embraced his death will be important since that can induce a similar response of self-giving from us. If we are drawn to the Acceptance Theory, the passion stories will illustrate how much God will embrace and the length to which God will go to remain united with us in whatever comes to us, always working to reconcile us to ourselves and the rest of the created order.

It is not that one of these theories is true and the others false, but that one of these will probably fit better for you and draw you toward it, and depending on which that is the passion story will have a particular meaning and will express certain very meaningful things.

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