

# Introduction

IF YOU ARE A BEGINNING student doing a degree in theology or religious studies and you want a fairly friendly guide that will get you from knowing almost nothing, because the lecturer sent you to sleep that day, to gaining a pretty good level of mastery of the subject over the space of a few hours of reading, this book is for you. If that is you then you will probably need to ignore the footnotes and just keep reading. I have tried to make this like one of those encyclopedias full of lovely pictures that make you feel that you have the complete subject in your hands. Good encyclopedias make you feel really clever when you put them down because each article sums up, in an accessible way, the very latest research that is normally accessible only to the experts. Yet, you have grasped it. This is an encyclopedia of the atonement. It does not contain references to everything that has ever been said on the subject within theology, but it covers everything you really need to know, and does so exhaustively, yet simply. It is a compendium on the subject. You are not likely to be caught out on anything you should know if you have read this.

If you are not a beginning undergraduate student but are a postgraduate student or a beginning researcher of any kind, this book is for you. The only difference is that you do need to read the footnotes—and the bibliography. The footnotes have been designed to give you access to the very latest research in as exhaustive a way possible. And, if this book goes into further revisions, I fully intend to keep adding to that. For you, this book is a repository, a bibliographical resource.

It will also stimulate your thinking. Each major topic finishes with some pointers as to how the subject might be made to interact with contemporary culture or some other current issue in church life. This I hope will help you as your research idea starts to take shape. These concluding sections are signposts to further research rather than items of research in their own right.

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Lastly (but not at all least), if you are not in academia but in ministry, and you have heard here and there that the atonement has suddenly—and perhaps for reasons that don't seem clear—become an issue of great controversy, this is for you. This book only very tentatively sketches out what my own conclusions are with regards to what is of merit in atonement theology and what is of rather less merit. Most books on the atonement that are coming out at the moment (thick and fast) are part of the controversy. They are polemical. This book tries to generate light rather than heat. It will equip you for debate and for the pulpit. It will not undermine your faith, it will strengthen it. You will be fed by reading the great thoughts of some great thinkers presented here. If you are in ministry then theology is all for you. We do what we do for you. The Christian academy itself is for your benefit and the benefit of your people. So read and be encouraged.

Now, for the parameters. With such a vast subject stretching out before us it seems especially important for me to point out what this book will not be. It will not, first of all, be a biblical survey of atonement theology. There are biblical metaphors of atonement and there are theological theories of atonement. This book deals with the latter. There are biblical authors who each show a particular emphasis in their treatment of the atonement and there are historical theologians who each had something valuable to say in their time. This book deals with the latter. It will exegete their writings using all the skills of a New Testament critic anxious that an author far removed from us in time and space be allowed to speak on their own terms to our situation. Where I do handle Scripture, it is through the lens of these historical theologians and their writings. In almost every case, I am looking at the way a theologian uses a biblical text, rather than analyzing it myself. For this reason, authors such as Frances Young, Martin Hengel, and John Vincent Taylor, who have all done some superb work on the atonement in Scripture, get barely a mention here. I do, however, harbor a strong ambition to eventually follow this book with one that will attempt a biblical theology of atonement. It is then that I will engage with those authors.

The second thing this book is not is that it is not a history of the doctrine of the atonement, but a history of *theories* of the atonement. Nevertheless, I hope it will be a useful update on the standard histories of the doctrine. It differs from them in that it does not survey all the theologians for what they say about the cross. Instead, it focuses on those theologians (and pastors) that have originated a theory of the atonement. Somebody once said that there are springs and there are lakes. Some theologians

merely collect water—they are the lakes. Others have that spark of originality, that creative something or other that makes them innovators of new forms of theology—they are springs, and it is springs we are mostly looking at there. Lakes are important too, of course, for the way they make use of what the springs have generated, and these are certainly not ignored. Take Thomas Aquinas for instance. He is certainly a monumental theologian but, when it comes to atonement theory, he is a lake. Whereas John McLeod Campbell, though a much lesser light than Thomas when it comes to the atonement, he's a bit of a genius—and so was Irenaeus, Anselm, Abelard, Luther, Calvin, Grotius, Girard, and so on. What about Augustine? Same again: a giant, probably an even bigger one than Thomas, but not when it came to atonement theology. Now I know the dividing line is difficult, since to a large extent they are all lakes: they are all relying on what has gone before and adapting it. However, in some cases this adaptation led to the creation of a recognized new theory of the atonement, a new species (a newt from a fish); in other cases it only resulted in a new breed (a fancy koi from a dull carp).

So, if you are beginning theology or religious studies, or you are a postgraduate researcher, or you are in ministry, this is for you. May God's Spirit use it to help you in your task.

New Year's Day  
2014