Thinking about atonement: understanding and explanation

Stuart Jesson

What does it mean to say that Jesus died 'for' our sins? Dr Stuart Jesson, who will be exploring that question in a forthcoming course at the London Jesuit Centre, 'On Being Saved', wonders what kind of explanation we are really looking for when we try to grapple with atonement theories, and why.

I remember being quite confused when, at a very young age, I heard that Jesus died 'for me' – and for everyone, in fact. I must have recently heard the story of Jesus and Barabbas before Pilate in the gospels, because I remember asking one of my parents: 'But didn't Jesus just die for Barabbas?' I had picked up a substitutionary sense of what it meant for Jesus's death to be 'for' someone, and it seemed straightforward to say that Jesus died *instead of* Barabbas. Barabbas was freed instead of Jesus, which means that, in a sense, Jesus died 'for' Barabbas. But it was not obvious how the same applied for me, or anyone else. In an inchoate way, what I wanted was a good *explanation* of how it could be said that Jesus's death was 'for' something – for me, for sins, for 'us', *etc*. The New Testament scholar, Morna Hooker, expressed the question very clearly: 'The statement that "he died" is clear enough; as for the notion of "our sins", we find that all too comprehensible. But how are his death and our sins related? What does that tiny word "for" signify?'

Photo by Jason Betz on Unsplash

I can reflect now that as a child I was already looking at this puzzle in a particular way: to use a word that appears often in the literature on atonement theology, I was enquiring about the 'mechanism' of atonement. That is, something that explains how it 'works': something of the form '*x* does *y* because of *z*'. And the link between atonement doctrine and the idea of a 'mechanism' is fairly prevalent in writing on atonement theology.[i] It is one thing to say *what* was 'happening' in the death of Christ; it is another thing to say *how* it happened. There is quite a lot in the New Testament about what was 'happening', or perhaps we should say, what God was *doing*. We find two such descriptions back-to-back in 2 Corinthians 5: 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them [. . .] For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' There is not so much about *how* this happened – that is to say, about how God did whatever it was that God did.

During my twenties I became rather fixated by this issue, perhaps because, influenced by evangelical accounts of the relationship between faith and being saved, it seemed very important to be able to explain how it could be that Christ died 'for sins'. If I couldn't give any satisfying explanation of this point – and I increasingly found that I couldn't – the fear was that perhaps I couldn't really give any account of why one should be a Christian at all. So my perplexity about 'this tiny word "for"' seemed like it might be a slippery slope, with unbelief at the bottom.

I read foundational texts by Athanasius, Irenaeus, Anselm, Luther and Calvin; took an exciting tour through Girardian theology; wrestled with some provocative and moving feminist theology as well James Cone's powerful account of 'the cross and the lynching tree'; considered some evangelical ripostes to all of the above, before returning to consider the role of the doctrine of incarnation in atonement via the work of Kathryn Tanner. All of this was intriguing, and at times inspiring. But at the same time, the process of enquiry also felt fraught, slightly wearying, and potentially unending. Each new account of what it could mean to say that Christ died 'for' sins seemed to give rise to another kind of perplexity.

So now I am left considering what I was looking for – and that is what I want to reflect on here. What kind explanation was I after? And why?

It seems reasonable to say that the good that explanation is meant to provide is understanding. We feel that something has been 'explained' if and when we find an account that increases our understanding of the matter in question.[ii] But it doesn't take long to realise that there are different kinds of explanation; there *have* to be different kinds of explanation, because there are different kinds of understanding to be acquired.[iii] Perhaps the most obvious difference is between causal explanation and purposive explanation. In the former, we are looking to understand why something came to happen, that is, *how* it works. Describing the 'mechanism' through which something happens would be one example of causal explanation. In the latter, we are looking to understand why something happened in a different sense – what something happened *for*. Purposive explanation seems to require the existence of something or someone that wants something, or aims at something; that is, it seems to be naturally allied with personal understanding.

One of the characteristics of causal explanation is the possibility of endless regress – the 'why regress'. It is always possible to ask why anything happens in the way it does, or why anything is the way it is. Eventually, the search for this kind of understanding terminates at the edges of the best available knowledge of the world. As the physicist Richard Feynman explained in one interview: if you ask why two magnets repel each other, you might start off by appealing to the principle that 'like repels like', and then, by talking about the polarity of the electrons in the metal. But if you keep on relentlessly asking 'why?' eventually you will just have to accept that the electro-magnetic force *is just like that*. In other words, physicists can't give us final, comprehensive explanations; they can just take us a bit deeper – say a little more about how the universe works. Or, in Feynman's image, they can just peel back one more layer of the onion – and they have no idea how many layers the onion might turn out to have.[iv] So the 'why regress' doesn't mean that explanation is ultimately impossible, it just means that in order for any particular explanation to *feel* satisfying, we have to accept some kind of a background picture against which it makes sense – at least for a while, until one senses the possibility of deeper understanding, and one begins to question some aspect of the background picture, as well.

But the key thing I want to note here is that the restlessness that generates the 'why regress' is actually perfectly suited to the expansion of our understanding of the world. It is, in part, because people are *not* satisfied with being told 'well, that's just gravity for you' that they are motivated to push back the boundaries of scientific knowledge. Scientific understanding of the world expands, in part, because of this restlessness. Explanations that previously worked start to seem unsatisfying, and the whole thing moves forward in the hope that there is still more to understand – and so far, it seems that there always *is* more.

But this explanatory restlessness can be misplaced when it comes to understanding people, and what they do. A full understanding of what a person is doing means understanding not just what they are aiming at, but also the deeper desires and concerns that lie in the background. Ultimately, I think, to understand fully what a person is doing involves some understanding of who they are, insofar as the question of who we are is so closely connected to our desires and concerns – the question of what we love. Often enough this kind of understanding has nothing much to do with causal explanation. Suppose my partner gives me a gift, without an obvious reason; I might then ask, 'why?' They might reply, 'just because I love you'. Under normal circumstances no further explanation is needed: their motivation in this particular action is linked to something bigger, more fundamental about them – that they love me – and that explains it. If I go on to ask a question such as, 'yes, but why would you buy a gift for someone you love?' or, 'ok, but why would you want to *show* someone that you love them?' then it's hard to find an adequate response. And *this* sort of quest for explanation might not really be a manifestation of a hunger for a deeper understanding of gift-giving at all. If a precocious child is asked 'why is your sister crying?' and they reply: 'it's a response to distress, designed to attract the attention of a primary care-giver', then they might well be very clever, but they are evading the question. So, I think, we can't explain things like romantic gifts without appealing to the nature of love, but we can't really explain the nature of love in terms of anything more fundamental – not if we want to say that love is at the very heart of reality, at least.[v] All we can do is to describe it more fully, as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 13, or – better – demonstrate it more convincingly through our lives, as Jesus commands in the Gospel of John. So a person who is unsatisfied by the answer 'because I love you' is probably destined to remain unsatisfied, because *no* explanation can really do the job that they want it to do.

How does all this relate to my search for a better understanding of the 'mechanism' of atonement? We do sometimes need a detour through causal explanation to explain a person's action when we can't see the link between what they're doing and what they want to achieve: why do it like *that*? If I suddenly start slapping my friend vigorously on the back, a causal explanation will help someone understand how in this particular case, the apparent violence could be an expression of my concern for my friend. I have to hit them because I want to dislodge something from their airway, and I want to dislodge something from their airway because I care about them. But here, the causal explanation very quickly comes back to the personal level, because it is not hard at all to see the connection between the back-slapping and concern for my friend.

But it is easy to see how the desire for more complete explanation of personal action can be side-tracked by the desire for causal explanation, and it might be that somehow in the detour we may lose track of the personal action altogether. Suppose I am watching someone baking a cake, and notice they are using a particular set of movements as they mix things together. I ask, 'what are you doing?', and they tell me that they are folding the mixture together. I am a baking novice, and so might ask for an explanation: why is 'folding' necessary? If they have the patience, they might explain it in terms of the need to mix a heavier mixture into a lighter mixture without losing the air bubbles in the lighter mixture. But what if something about this explanation puzzles me? I might stop thinking about this particular cake and go on to ask why air bubbles are necessary in any case, and what this has to do with the texture and taste of a cake, and from there, how taste buds work, and so on and so on – it could be quite fascinating. But it would also mean that I would no longer be asking about this person's actions at all. However detailed the answers became, the explanatory trajectory as a whole would shed no light at all on the purpose of this cake: whet-

her it is for a wedding, a birthday, to raise money for charity, or just a pretext to go and visit someone who is lonely, *etc*. It is one thing to understand how taste buds work and, therefore, why cake mixture should be folded, but quite another to understand the reasons that someone might have to bake a cake at a particular time.

It now seems to me that some of my questions about atonement theology – the meaning of 'this tiny word "for"'—have been a bit like the question about folding a cake mixture. They have often led me in a direction that doesn't end up shedding any light on the event in question, because they are no longer really about purposeful, personal action, but about the 'mechanics' of atonement, as if the 'mechanics' were somehow the object of interest, the thing worth coming to understand.

I think that this may be because at times the story of atonement has been told in such a way that the two levels of explanation have little to do with each other. That is, the causal, or pseudo-mechanical kind of explanation seems to be running parallel to, but independently of, the personal kind of explanation that tells us what the mysteriously personal God is doing. Consider how we might understand the gospel as expressed in John 3:16. On the one hand, we have a specific act framed in terms of a deep motivation linked with a particular goal: 'God so *loved* the world that he *gave* his only Son, *so that* everyone who believes…'. But in order for us to understand why this particular action was necessary, we might be pointed to an atonement theory, which explains why the 'giving' of God's son had to involve death, and how the death could become a benefit to us, *etc*. But for many people, the terms of such atonement theories will themselves be puzzling, and before we know it, we embark on an explanatory quest, regarding whichever set of terms the theory is made up of: how does 'substitution' really work? Why did God need 'satisfaction'? Who is this 'ransom' paid to – and why? What is 'scapegoating', and how did it emerge? And so on. But if we are really critical and restless, it will probably be hard to know where to stop this enquiry, or which layer of the onion is the final one. One possible point of terminus might be a basically retributive intuition: it *just is* true that sin has to be punished or paid for in some way; it *just is* true that God must be satisfied. Perhaps this is all well and good, and we should just be content to stop the explanatory task at some point so that we can think about something else. But it is hard to escape the feeling here that something about the onion-peeling has gone wrong: that we have gone from trying to understand what the mysteriously personal God was and is doing, to acting like theologian-scientists trying to probe more deeply into the spiritual mechanics of the universe.

Perhaps the endless onion-peeling would be ok, if that was what I most deeply wanted from theology. But when I am honest with myself, I know that it is not. One striking – and obvious – feature of New Testament writings about the death and resurrection of Christ is that they are reflecting on something that the mysteriously personal God had *done*. Connected to this is another: the sense that the understanding of what the mysteriously personal God has done in Christ is intimately tied to a new understanding of how and where God is at work in the world. That is, whatever God was doing in Christ tells us something about how God is alive and active in the world. The rest of the sentence in the passage from 2 Corinthians quoted above reads: 'in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, *and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us*.' For Paul, the revelation that God had been at work in the death of Christ was inseparable from his own transformed understanding of how God was at work in and through his own life.

If I am honest, the New Testament writings on the meaning of the death of Christ remain puzzling to me. I am still a fair way from being able to see things in such a way that the explanations

that *are* offered straightforwardly point me to a deeper understanding of the mysterious actions of a personal God in the world and in me – which they are clearly intended to. But perhaps my dissatisfaction with my own theological questioning can help me to ask another important question: 'what *do* I want from theology? What kind of hunger is this, and what *would* satisfy it?' It is better to be honest about what one is really hungry for, than to keep feeding oneself with never-ending layers of onion.

Stuart Jesson graduated with a degree in Literature and Theology from the University of Hull in 2000. From 2003-9 he studied Philosophical Theology part-time at the University of Nottingham, whilst continuing to work in the third sector with vulnerably-housed or homeless people, and young asylum seekers. He was lecturer at York St John University for almost a decade, before moving to the London Jesuit Centre in 2021, where he is the lead for theology.

'On Being Saved' is a five-session course offered online or in person at the London Jesuit Centre in March. For more information and registration, visit https://londonjesuitcentre.org/on-being-saved

---

[i] For example an excellent recent introductory book suggests that we only have a full atonement 'doctrine' (as opposed to a motif, or metaphor) when we have an account of an atonement 'mechanism'. See Oliver Crisp, *Approaching the Atonement: The Reconciling Work of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2020).

[ii] See Peter Lipton, 'What good is an explanation?' in *Explanation: Theoretical Approaches and Applications*, ed. Giora Hon and Sam S. Rakover (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001).

[iii] Unless, of course, one wants to claim that ultimately everything can be understood in the language of physics, or perhaps mathematics. There are lots of good reasons *not* to claim this!

[iv] See the documentary 'The Pleasure of Finding Things Out' available at https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6ptg1x and the BBC series 'Fun to Imagine' available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYg6jzotiAc

[v] Of course, it might be argued that love is something like an epiphenomenon or by-product of evolution: we feel what we need to feel if we are to form the attachments that are useful in order to raise offspring to reproductive age successfully, or to co-operate successfully with others in order to survive, etc. But if the question 'why do you love me?' is ultimately motivated by the need to be loved, then we won't, of course, be satisfied by this kind of explanation.