Christianity 101:  
20 Basic Christian Beliefs—Chapter 10  
What Is the Atonement?

I. Introduction  
a. In your own words describe what is the Atonement.  
   i. The work Jesus did in living and dying to earn our salvation is sometimes referred to as the atonement.¹  
   ii. The Atonement is Christ’s substitutionary death on Calvary’s cross to redeem men who are all lost sinners (Romans 3:9-18, 23) and who must therefore face the penalty of death (Romans 6:23). Although we should have faced our penalty God “…made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). At Calvary “…He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed” (1 Peter 2:24)

II. The Cause of the Atonement  
a. Why did there have to be an Atonement?  
   i. God’s justice is affirmed when Paul writes that God put forward Jesus “as a propitiation” (Rom. 3:25), that is, a sacrifice that bears God’s wrath so that God looks favorably toward us. Paul says this was done “to show God’s righteousness” and also “so that he might be just” (Rom. 3:25–26).²  
   ii. In other words, the sins God “passed over” or didn’t punish before Christ came to earth had to be punished somehow if God was to “be just.”³

b. How does Jesus’ life and death express God’s justice and faithful love?  
   i. In Jesus’ life and death, we find a full expression of God’s justice (sin is punished) and faithful love (God gave his own Son to bear the punishment).⁴


III. The Necessity of the Atonement
   a. Why was the Atonement necessary?
      i. Jesus knew there was no other way for God to save us than for him to die in our place. Jesus had to suffer and die for our sins. Other means, like the sacrifices offered for sins in the Old Testament had no lasting value, for “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). Jesus, “by means of his own blood,” secured “an eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12), thereby putting away sin “by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb. 9:26).  

IV. The Nature of the Atonement
   a. What is the difference between Passive and Active Obedience?
      i. Jesus’ Passive Obedience was His willingly dying on the cross for our atonement and His Active Obedience was the perfect, sinless life that He lived in order to be qualified to redeem us, “…with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18-19).
      ii. “Covenant theologians (and other Reformed theologians) say Christ’s perfect active obedience was vicarious. He died to remove the penalty of sin: He obeyed the Law in order to purchase eternal life for the believer. According to covenant theology, the passive obedience of Christ takes care of the penalty of sin—we are forgiven. But this is not enough? Those who hold to the Active Obedience of Christ believe that we also need the righteousness of Christ earned while on earth (the active obedience) to take us off of neutral and make us righteous. The purpose of the active obedience is to have available righteousness to be imputed to our account.” (Appendix)

b. What did Jesus learn through suffering?
   i. It was through these and other sufferings that “he learned obedience” (though he never once disobeyed) and “became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (Heb. 5:8–9).  

c. What does it mean that Jesus bore the sins of many?
   i. But the physical pain was nothing compared to the spiritual pain. Jesus never sinned. Jesus hated sin. Yet Jesus voluntarily took upon himself all the sins of those who one day would be saved. “He bore the sins of many” (Isa. 53:12). That which he hated with his whole being was poured out upon him. As Peter tells us, “He himself bore our sins in his

---

5 Wayne A. Grudem, Christian Beliefs: Twenty Basics Every Christian Should Know (ed. Elliot Grudem; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 73.

d. **What else did Jesus suffer on the cross besides physical pain, mental anguish, and complete abandonment?**
   
i. Even more difficult than the physical pain, mental anguish, and complete abandonment was the pain of bearing the full wrath of God upon himself. As Jesus bore the guilt of our sins, God unleashed all wrath and punishment for our sins upon his own Son. Jesus became the object of the intense hatred of sin and vengeance against sin that God had patiently stored up since the beginning of the world.¹⁰

V. The Result of the Atonement

a. **In your own words describe the result (or results) of the Atonement.**
   
i. Christ lived a perfect, sinless life and died a horrific, sinner’s death in order to “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). He paid the penalty we deserved to pay for our sin. He bore the wrath we deserved to bear. He overcame the separation our sin caused between God and us. He freed us from the bondage caused by sin. Because of Christ’s work on our behalf, God can “deliver us from the domain of darkness” and transfer “us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col. 1:13). What a great salvation!¹⁰

VI. Questions for Review and Application

a. Why was it necessary for Jesus to come and live a perfect life on earth?

b. Why was it necessary that Jesus die? Could he have saved us in some other way?

c. How does your understanding of the atonement humble you? How does it encourage you?

---


Appendix: The Active & Passive Obedience of Christ
(Dr. LARRY PETTEGREW, TH.D.)

****New Covenant Theologians deny the Doctrine of the Active Obedience of Christ****

The obedience that Christ rendered to the Father has been divided by Reformed theologians into Active Obedience and Passive Obedience.

Charles Hodge: “By the righteousness of Christ is meant all he became, did, and suffered to satisfy the demands of divine justice, and merit for his people the forgiveness of sin and the gift of eternal life. The righteousness of Christ is commonly represented as including his active and passive obedience” (Systematic Theology, III:142).

[Jesus’ sinlessness was necessary for our salvation. Had he not been “a lamb without blemish or defect” his blood would not have been “precious” (1 Pet. 1:19). He would have needed a savior himself, and his death would not have redeemed us. His active obedience (perfect lifelong conformity to God’s law for mankind, and to his revealed will for the Messiah) qualified Jesus to become our Savior by dying for us on the cross. Jesus’ passive obedience (enduring the penalty of God’s broken law as our sinless substitute) crowned his active obedience to secure the pardon and acceptance of those who put their faith in him (Rom. 5:18–19; 2 Cor. 5:18–21; Phil. 2:8; Heb. 10:5–10).]

I. The Passive Obedience of Christ
   a. “In addition to obeying the law perfectly for his whole life on our behalf, Christ also took on Himself the sufferings necessary to pay the penalty for our sins.” (Grudem, pg. 571)
   b. This is primarily His suffering on the cross to pay our penalty for sin.

II. The Active Obedience of Christ (Proposed Doctrine)
   a. Christ not only died as a substitute for sinners who could not pay the penalty for their own sins, he also obeyed the Law as a substitute for those same sinners who were likewise unable to keep the Law themselves.
      i. All Biblicists believe that Jesus, who was born under the Law of Moses, never sinned and obeyed the Law perfectly.
      ii. Covenant theologians (and other Reformed theologians) say Christ’s perfect active obedience was vicarious.
      iii. He died to remove the penalty of sin: He obeyed the Law in order to purchase eternal life for the believer
      iv. According to covenant theology, the passive obedience of Christ takes care of the penalty of sin—we are forgiven.
      v. But this is not enough?
      vi. Those who hold to the Active Obedience of Christ believe that we also need the righteousness of Christ earned while on earth (the active obedience) to take us off of neutral and make us righteous.
      vii. The purpose of the active obedience is to have available righteousness to be imputed to our account.

———

III. Historical considerations
   a. Active obedience seems to come into existence with covenant theology in the post-Reformation years. (Roots in Calvin).
   b. Westminster Confession (1647): “Those whom God effectually calleth he also freely justifieth; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous... by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them.”
   c. Continues to be taught today in Reformed and Covenant circles.
   d. There seems to be some connection of the active obedience teaching with the covenant of works in covenant theology.

IV. Exegetical Considerations’
   a. A sinner is declared righteous on the basis of one act (Romans 5:18-19)
      i. Romans 5:18-19 18 Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. 19 For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.
      ii. Note that Paul is specifically contrasting two individual acts: Adam’s and Christ’s.
      iii. Context: in verses 1-11, Paul is speaking of Christ’s death, with no mention of a life of obedience.
         1. “... His life of active obedience in general is not in view in the passage” (Snider, 53).
   b. The verb, “justify” is always found in the context of the substitutionary death of Christ in the NT.

   “The verb for justification... appears in the NT thirty-nine times. Twenty-two of these occurrences speak of justification in a soteriological sense, and all are found in Paul’s writings. In none of these occurrences is the active obedience of Christ associated with justification, nor is it present in the context. A check of the uses of other words in the same word group reveals a similar conclusion. Justification is always by faith in Christ because of his death on behalf of sinners” (Snider, 87).

   c. The righteousness of God is imputed in the act of justification is consistently described as the righteousness of God.
      i. 2 Corinthians 5:21 21 For our sake he [God] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
   d. It would seem therefore that our salvation does not result from the imputation of Christ’s law-keeping righteousness?
      i. So, justification only comes by the blood of Christ, by His death.
      ii. Justification, grounded in the death of Christ, is associated with the many benefits of salvation

V. The value of the Active Obedience of Christ (His law-keeping)
   a. It qualified Him to be the sin-bearer
      i. Lewis and Demarest: “Christ’s perfect keeping of God’s law (active obedience) throughout his life enabled him to offer the perfect sacrifice (in passive obedience) on the cross” (Integrative Theology, 2:401).
      ii. Snider: “Christ’s divine righteousness is manifested in his active obedience, which facilitates, qualifies, and validates his passive obedience, which in turn makes possible the imputation of divine righteousness” (97).
1. **2 Corinthians 5:21**  
   For our sake he [God] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

b. It enabled Him to fulfill the old covenant.
   i. Matthew 5:17: “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.”
   ii. Matthew 27:50-51: “And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. . . .”

c. It enabled Him to open up the new covenant (Acts 2:33)
   i. Acts 2:33: “Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit [the energizer of the new covenant], He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. (Act 2:33 NAU)

d. It enabled Him to be our High Priest—Heb. 2:17-18; 5:8-10
   i. Hebrews 2:17-18: “Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.”