

CHRIST'S DEATH AS AN EXAMPLE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The biblical writers used a multiplicity of images to convey the meaning of the work of Christ.¹ The Epistle to the Hebrews portrays Jesus Christ as the great high priest who offered himself as the perfect sacrifice in the place of sinners. Hebrews 9:26b reads, "But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself." (NIV)

Romans 5:12-21 sets forth the Lord Jesus as the second Adam who by his voluntary obedience countered the disobedience of our first father Adam and brought justification and eternal life to his people. Philippians 2:8 reflects the same atonement motif when it states that Jesus "became obedient to death -- even death on a cross!" (NIV)

A third theme of the atonement presents Christ as the victor who through his death and resurrection defeats the foes of sin, death, the world, and Satan and thus wins for every believer a great victory.² This theme is taught in such passages as 1 Cor 15:54-57 and Heb 2:14-15. This latter passage says, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death -- that is, the devil -- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." (NIV)

There is also a legal theme of Christ's work in the Scriptures. Galatians 3:13-14, 4:4-5 present Christ as a legal substitute who perfectly fulfilled the law in his life and who took the condemnation that lawbreakers deserved in his death on the cross. Galatians 3:13 begins, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us ..." (NIV)

One atonement motif which has been overplayed by some and almost neglected by others is Christ's death as an example. This certainly is not the key or central understanding of the work of Christ in the NT. At the very heart of NT theology the atonement is redemptive -- Christ died to save his people from their sins. Yet there is a definite exemplarist strain in the NT picture of the work of Christ.

Martin Luther exercises the theological caution which is necessary in presenting Christ's death as an example. In his unique style Luther stresses that Christ as an example (*Exempel*) is important, yet fundamentally more important is Christ as Savior (Luther uses the word "gift," *Gabe*).

Be sure, moreover, that you do not make Christ into a Moses, as if Christ did nothing more than teach and provide examples as the other saints do, as if the gospel were simply a textbook of teachings or laws. Therefore you should grasp Christ, his words, works, and sufferings, in a twofold manner. First as an example that is presented to you, which you should follow and imitate. As St. Peter says in