

# THE SEVEN LEVELS OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT, DECISION-MAKING, AND THEORIES OF ATONEMENT

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## LEVEL 1 - Reward and punishment

Right and wrong is determined by whoever holds the power to rule by threat of punishment and hope of reward. Mercy (failure to punish) is seen by others at this level as being weak, rather than being moral. This is the level ancient Israel operated at as slaves in Egypt. They did what the task masters said in order to avoid punishment.

People at level one insist that God uses his power to torture and kill the unrepentant wicked, as evidenced when he first established his credentials to rule Israel by acts of punishment upon the Egyptian gods, and by mighty, spectacular miracles demonstrating the Egyptian gods were not gods at all.

This level of thinking is so primitive that it doesn't even require a brain; the mind is completely sidelined. Animals, plants, and even bacteria can be conditioned to avoid painful stimuli and grow toward rewarding stimuli. It is Satan's goal to reduce mankind to "brute beasts and creatures of instinct" operating at level one.

**Satisfaction Theory** of the atonement most closely matches Level One thinking, which is summarized as follows: God said don't do something, but when we disobey and do what God said not to do, this dishonors and offends him. Therefore, in his justice, he responds with angry vengeance to execute the disobedient to satisfy his outrage. But then Jesus stepped in between God and man to become humanity's substitute. Thus, instead of killing man, God killed his Son in our place and is now satisfied that his honor and justice are preserved.

## LEVEL 2 - Marketplace exchange

Right and wrong is determined by an equitable agreement between two parties, also known as quid pro quo – "I'll do something for you if you do something for me." At this level vengeance is a moral duty. People who do evil must be paid back with an equal amount of pain and suffering, in other words, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." To not return pain and suffering is considered immoral. This was ancient Israel saying at Sinai, when the law was first read, "All the Lord has said, we will do."

**Ransom Theory** of the atonement most closely matches Level Two thinking, which is summarized as follows: Because earth and humanity are now the legal property of Satan and under his control, the devil claimed legal rights to this earth and the lives of the descendants of Adam and Eve. Therefore, God struck a bargain with the devil to exchange the life of Christ for the lives of the rest of humanity.

## LEVEL 3 - Social conformity

Right and wrong is determined by community consensus, for example, when a child says, "But everyone else is doing it." Right is deemed right by the approval of peers.

This was ancient Israel when they wanted kings. All the other nations had kings, so it must be right, thus Israel demanded to have kings.

**Governmental Theory** of the atonement most closely matches Level Three thinking, which is summarized as follows: In order for everyone to be convinced that God is fair and right in dealing with sin and sinners by inflicting torturous punishment, somebody has to pay the price. That somebody is Jesus, because he's the only one who could pay that price to get mankind off the hook.

#### **LEVEL 4 - Law and order**

Right and wrong is determined by a codified system of rules, impartial judges, imposed punishments, and respect for authority. Right is getting a proper pay or reward for good work, and proscribed and inflicted punishment for breaking the rules. Authority figures are rarely questioned, "He must be right, because he is the President, the Judge, the Pope, God, etc."

This was ancient Israel at the time of Christ – "we have a law!" they proclaimed, as they sought to stone Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. This is much of our modern world, with its codified laws, courts, prosecutors, judges, juries, and imposed rules. Authority at this level rests in the coercive pressure of the state to bring punishment upon those who deviate from the established laws. At this level, police agencies and law enforcers are required to monitor the population, searching for breaches in the law in order to impose standardized penalties.

**Penal Substitution Theory** of the atonement most closely matches Level Four thinking, which is summarized as follows: Jesus died to pay the legal penalty the law demanded and the heavenly judge imposed. The law must be kept. Man broke the law, thus justice demands and requires the imposition of the proper punishment. Someone had to be executed to pay the legal penalty. Jesus became our substitute and was executed in our place by God the Father (as the righteous judge) to pay that penalty. In doing so, the integrity of the law is maintained and sinners can be pardoned, but only if they claim the legal payment made by Jesus.

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#### **LEVEL 5 - Love for others**

Right is determined by doing what is in the best interest of others, realizing people have value in who they are irrespective of the rules. Wrong is determined, not by a checklist of rules, but by not doing what is actually helpful and beneficial for another.

Jesus demonstrated this when he touched lepers, spoke to women, socialized with tax collectors, and healed on the Sabbath. The Pharisees, operating at level four and below, wanted to stone Him for breaking the law.

**Moral Influence Theory** of the atonement most closely matches Level Five thinking, which is summarized as follows: Sin separated us from God and corrupted our hearts, so that we no longer trusted God, but God loved us too much to let us go, so Christ's death was the means to reach us with his love and restore us to trust in him.

#### **LEVEL 6 - Principle based living**

Right is understanding the design protocols and principles upon which life is constructed to operate and intelligently choosing to live in harmony with them. Right is not doing something because a rule says to do so, but because it is understood to actually work this way.

This was Jesus living out God's character of love in all He did, and the Apostles after Pentecost. It is understood that God says what is right because it is right, because it is the way things actually are. It isn't right simply because God said it.

**Recapitulation and Christus Victor Theories** of the atonement most closely matches Level Six thinking, which is summarized as follows: Christ's life, death, and resurrection is understood to be the only means to fix what sin had done to God's creation. When mankind sinned, the condition of humankind was changed, placing it out of harmony with God and his design for life. Humankind was now held in bondage by their own condition of sinfulness (carnal nature), their terminal state (death), and the lies about God told by Satan. Christ came to break these three powers and fix what sin has done to this creation. Thus "he who knew no sin became sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God." 2Cor 5:21.

## **LEVEL 7 - Understanding Friend of God**

Those at this level not only have love for God and others (Level 5), not only understand God's design protocols for life (Level 6), but also understand God's purposes and intelligently choose to cooperate in fulfilling their role in His purposes.

Jesus said to His disciples in John 15:15, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."

People at this level understand the truth about God's character of love, His nature and design for life, the origin of evil, the nature of sin, the weapons of Satan, the original purpose for the creation of humanity, the fall of humanity into sin, God's working through human history, the purpose of the Cross, and the ultimate cleansing of the universe from sin. Jesus operated at this level, as will all those who are ready for translation when Jesus comes again.

**Healing Substitution Reality** most closely matches Level Seven thinking, which is summarized as follows: The plan of salvation is understood to have a deeper and broader intent than just the redemption of the human species. Both level five and six are true: God's character of love has been misrepresented, His methods of truth, love, and freedom have not been fully understood, so God had a larger purpose than just the salvation of humankind; He was also solidifying the unfallen beings in loyalty to His design methods and character of love.