

Related Topics

THE MODERN GOSPEL'S BIBLICAL PROBLEMS

The modern gospel states

- All people, having sinned, are unrighteous. Hence, due to God's perfect sense of justice, no one is naturally qualified for heaven.
- To address this, God sent Jesus as a sacrifice to grant forgiveness of sins to all believers. Alternatively, Jesus receives the sins and punishment of all believers, giving them a contrived perfection.
- Those who have faith in Christ, and only those who believe in Christ, can thus enter heaven as their sins have been addressed.
- God has no choice but to consign all others to hell for unforgiven sin.

Throughout this work, I have discussed several reasons why the above is biblically unacceptable. A summary of these is given below:

1. It presupposes the Judgment has the format of a court of law where only our offenses are relevant. Christ's teachings on the Judgment indicate godly deeds (which Jesus and others say can be done even by those who have no knowledge of Christ) are as relevant as our failings.
2. The Bible depicts many people, including those who never knew of Jesus, as righteous. The idea that a single sin makes someone unrighteous in God's eyes is thoroughly destroyed by any reasonable reading of scripture.
3. The modern gospel claims faith in Christ is the only means by which sins can be forgiven, but scripture gives at least six different routes to forgiveness, most available to non-believers.
4. It fails to make any sense of why the original apostles only spread the gospel of Christ to other Jews during the decade after Christ's death. These men were full of the Holy Spirit and had been given a complete teaching of God's work through Jesus [*Luke 24:27*]. To suggest they believed Christ's purpose was to save believers from hell would indicate they wanted all non-Jews to be consigned to eternal torment.

5. It assumes God holds all people to the same standard of conduct, a claim without biblical support. Dozens of passages demonstrate otherwise.
6. It fails to show the relevance of Christ's life and resurrection in God's salvific plan. If we are saved through Christ's sacrifice, then the resurrection itself is rather unneeded. Yet the early apostles and church fathers based their theories of salvation squarely upon the resurrection rather than the sacrificial aspect of Christ's death. Jesus is never referred to as a sacrifice or propitiation anywhere in all the evangelism captured in Acts (the most comprehensive repository of the apostles' actual teachings to unbelievers), and very rarely is He so described elsewhere.
7. It declares Jesus' sacrifice grants forgiveness of all sins to believers when the Bible specifically says otherwise.
8. It is not consistent with the context and purpose of the Messiah as found in the later prophets.
9. Jesus' own disciples did not know of His coming death and resurrection even though He attempted to tell them privately about it. Thus, it is impossible for the modern gospel to have had any real place in the general message Jesus and His apostles proclaimed to the crowds during Christ's earthly ministry.
10. Jesus, Paul, and many others indicate that believers and unbelievers are *both* in danger of hell due to their sins.
11. The modern gospel cannot explain how Enoch and Elijah were allowed to ascend to God's presence before Christ's sacrifice. Suggesting God forgave people before Jesus by looking forward to Christ's sacrifice would render nonsensical much of the Old Testament.
12. It is impossible to read Matthew, Mark, or Luke in isolation and come away with any semblance of the modern gospel. Thus, we must reject the modern gospel or else claim these writers cruelly and willfully misled their readers, for they could not assume their audience had access to any other specific commentary on Christ's purpose.
13. It violates Jesus' own teachings regarding how those who came before Him are judged. In particular it fails to explain how those who never knew of a coming Christ (much less that Jesus was He) could possibly be saved from hell.
14. It claims forgiveness of sins is the prevailing aspect of the Judgment while the vast majority of Judgment portrayals in the Bible make no mention of forgiveness at all.

15. It does not explain how the *entire creation*, including animals and God's angels, were reconciled to God through Christ's blood, for we do not generally believe either of these kinds of creatures guilty of sin.
16. Jesus was sent to mediate the new covenant, so it is unnatural to suggest His sacrifice was aimed at the Judgment (which transcends covenant, for all are judged).
17. The Bible proclaims the **entire world** and **all people** have been saved through Christ. If salvation is derived from forgiveness of individuals' sins, such would imply that all have been forgiven of their sins, not just those who believe in Christ.
18. All the original apostles, and all Jewish Christians of the first century, continued to obey the cultural Jewish laws. The modern gospel has trouble explaining why Peter, nine years after Christ's death, still believed he could not enter a Gentile's house. It also leaves one bewildered as to why Paul was just as ardent about keeping the Mosaic laws after his conversion as before.
19. It does not respect the Jewish understanding of salvation, a rather serious issue given that all the books of the New Testament were written by Jews, the original Christian church was almost entirely Jewish, and the gospels relate Jesus' interactions with Jews.

WHAT JESUS DIDN'T PREACH

It often comes as a shock to Christians to hear what *wasn't* part of Jesus' message during His ministry on earth. By *message* I mean *what He and His disciples preached to the Jewish crowds before His death*. (Jesus sends out His disciples to preach the gospel in *Matthew 10:5ff*; *Mark 6:7*; and *Luke 9:1*.)

In particular:

- His message did not include *anything* about His death or resurrection, and it certainly didn't indicate anything about His being a sacrifice.
- Until the very end of His ministry, His message did not even include anything about His being the Messiah.

I realize the above may look idiotic. A few points to consider:

- We must separate what He taught His disciples from what He preached to the crowds.
- We must recall that His message to the crowds who came to hear Him was of a different nature than His answers to Pharisees who questioned Him.
- We must understand that the gospel writers chose items from Jesus' ministry that got across points they wanted their readers to know. Much of this happened at the very end of His ministry and is not representative of what He taught during the years He preached throughout the land earlier.
- We must separate what Jesus says from commentary by the gospel writer (like *John 3:13–21*).
- We must realize that we see (after the fact) hints Jesus gave which even His disciples did not understand at the time.

The above points should help clear up the confusion you are bound to have as I show that it simply cannot be the case that Jesus preached the modern gospel to the crowds He encountered for a day or two each while traveling throughout the holy land.

Of course, *after* His death, Jesus' apostles did preach these truths. I'm certainly not claiming that Jesus is not the Christ or that He didn't rise from the

dead. I'm merely pointing out that He did not preach these things before dying, and hence nothing like the modern gospel could have been in His general message. This is extremely important to keep in mind while interpreting His teachings found in the gospel accounts.

For example, as you read through Jesus' descriptions of the Judgment highlighted in the first two chapters, it is useful to know there was no implicit understanding of Jesus dying for people's sins or saving those who "believed in Him." When the gospel writers speak of people **believing** in Jesus, it does not mean what that phrase conjures up for most people today. His disciples **believed** in Him and knew nothing of His death and resurrection. Even in John, the gospel most likely to be used to support the modern gospel, it often just meant to believe Jesus was sent from God.¹

What Did Jesus Preach about His Death?

While Jesus certainly dropped hints about His coming death, it wasn't part of His and His disciples' message since not even His disciples understood that He was going to die and rise again. Furthermore, it was not until the last nine months or so that He even **began** telling *them* about it. (I'll explain the importance of the **began** part later.)

This all becomes easier to understand if we look through the eyes of the Jews of Jesus' day. Some, but not all, believed there would be a resurrection, but it would be far, far in the future and it would happen for everyone at once. The idea that the Messiah would die and rise again *before everyone else* was completely unknown. While it was encoded in the prophets, no one got it.

No one.

That's why the disciples were totally disheartened (*Luke 24:20*) when Jesus died, because they thought that was the end. **But we had hoped that He was the one who was going to redeem Israel.** (Note the verb is in the imperfect tense in the Greek as well. "Were hoping" or "used to hope" would be, strictly speaking, more accurate translations. In any event, the point is that they no longer were hopeful.) *John 20:9* also explicitly indicates the disciples did not know He was going to rise from the dead.

It's understandable that the disciples had not figured any of this out due to their understanding of what the Messiah would do. Today we demonize the

¹E.g., *John 6:42; 8:42-43; 9:33; 11:42; 16:30; and 17:21*

Pharisees as rejecting Jesus “because they wanted a political leader.” That can hardly be the reason they rejected Jesus, for it was the same expectation His own disciples had! They assumed, like anyone else, that He was going to eventually be king over Israel. Just as David had lived in hiding as the rightful king of Israel until Saul’s reign ended, they assumed Jesus would eventually be exalted. The idea that He would die made no sense to them. This is why there is the curious conversation in *Mark 9:9–13*. The disciples wonder what **rising from the dead meant** because it *couldn’t possibly mean Jesus was going to die*.

They wondered what figurative meaning it had. The prophets occasionally used the idea of resurrection metaphorically, and Jesus was known to speak in parables, so it is not surprising that they heard Christ describe His future suffering and assumed it referred to something else. The crowd in *John 12:34* shows a similar understanding that the Christ would not die.

In *Matthew 16:21*; *Mark 8:31*; and *Luke 9:22* Jesus **began** to tell the disciples of the things that would happen to Him. Matthew and Mark explicitly use that phrase — **began to tell**. It might look like Luke indicates otherwise, but then in *Luke 9:45* Jesus is telling them about His imminent betrayal and they don’t understand. *Mark 9:9–13* would also look odd if we thought Jesus had told them everything earlier. I believe Peter’s confession marks the time Jesus started warning His disciples a little at a time of what would happen.

Peter gets upset in *Matthew 16:21–22* that any dishonor at all would be shown to Christ, the rightful King of Israel. The idea that Peter was upset about Jesus undergoing suffering makes far more sense than suggesting Peter was upset that Christ would die and rise again as Lord. Every other piece of scripture indicates the apostles were oblivious until after His resurrection, and the notion that any of this discussion was taught to the public makes no sense given that Jesus did not even want them telling others He was the Christ.

Later when He tells them clearly (*Matthew 17:23*; *Luke 18:32–33*; *Mark 9:31–33*; *John 13:33*; and *16:16–18*), they still don’t get it. In *Matthew 17:23* we read the disciples were **deeply grieved**, which suggests their understanding was obviously misconceived. The other passages clearly say they did not know what He meant.

Since Jesus didn’t even hint of any of these things to His disciples until nine months before His death, and they never figured it out anyway, it certainly could not be considered part of His general message. He sent out His disciples to preach in all the villages *before* He began to speak on this topic at all.

The above information might make *Matthew 20:28* confusing. In that verse Jesus says . . . **just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many**.

There are four important points to be made about this snippet:

- This pronouncement comes right before Jesus' death and is not representative of His teachings during His earlier ministry. Further, it was evidently not vital enough for Luke to include it in his narrative.
- He is speaking only to the disciples, and even they did not understand. *Luke 24:21–27* shows no one had an inkling of His coming death. *John 20:9* confirms this.
- Many early church fathers saw Christ as a ransom paid to *Satan*. It would take the church about 1000 years to fully reject this, so we cannot with any intellectual integrity claim Jesus is clearly describing Himself as an atoning sacrifice to God. We read that into the text based on what we have been told, but early church fathers did not see it that way.
- *Hebrews 9:15* and *Romans 3:25* show this ransom was for sins committed under the first covenant by humanity at large. (Israel sinned directly against God by failing to keep the Law given to them, the Gentiles sinned against God by oppressing God's people.)

Did Jesus Preach He is the Christ?

Jesus did tell the (Samaritan) woman at the well that He was the Christ in *John 4:26*. Otherwise we see instance after instance where He tries to keep that information under wraps. He silences demons to stop them from proclaiming this (*Luke 4:41*), and every description of Peter's confession shows Christ earnestly commanding them not to tell anyone (*Matthew 16:20*; *Mark 8:30*; and *Luke 9:21*). This all happened *after* the disciples were sent out to preach around Judea.

People later start to think that perhaps He is the Christ, but not because He is saying so. When Peter declares it, the reason is due to divine revelation (*Matthew 16:17*), and the disciples don't indicate the crowds had drawn that conclusion from all the teachings and healing they had seen up to that point (*Matthew 16:13–15*).

This last verse is revealing in another way. Jesus was calling Himself the **Son of Man**, but that was not understood as a title for the Christ. *Matthew 16:13–14* and *John 12:34* both show this. Thus, Jesus' long dialogue with the Pharisees in *John 10* cannot be considered declaring Himself as the Christ. It isn't until seven months before His death that people start thinking He might be

the Christ or someone as powerful.²

Other than during the trial before the Sanhedrin, the only time Jesus directly indicated He was the Christ to a Jewish crowd was out of exasperation with the Pharisees four months before His death (*John 10:36*), after they had misconstrued His claim in *John 10:30*. In all other instances, He gave indirect answers. And the fact that He had to be asked about it indicates that it was not the focus of His teachings. After all, if Jesus' message had anything to do with His being the Christ, the Pharisees would not have been so frustrated in *John 10:24*. Note His answer **I told you and you do not believe. The deeds I do in my Father's name testify about me.** This is one example of many where Jesus does not make a claim but wants people to decide one way or the other about Him based on the commands He gave (*John 7:17*) and His works (*Luke 7:22*), but primarily on the former (*John 10:38*).

We read His words and see things that look like direct claims to Messiah that were not. For example, we take His use of the title **Son of Man** as a claim to Messiah, but the Jews did not understand it that way. Similarly, He says the scriptures speak of Him in *John 5:39*–. We take that as an indication that He is the Christ, but the scriptures also speak of Elijah (the one who comes before Christ). Indeed, it appears that most people thought that Jesus was Elijah.³

This observation also proves Jesus' general message could not have been that He was the Messiah. Had He been telling people He was the Christ, people would not have declared He was **the prophet** (*John 6:14* and *7:40*) instead or believed He might be Elijah.⁴ Once we accept that Jesus was not telling people He was the Christ, it becomes much easier to understand why people thought He might be Elijah. Elijah has to come first, and John the Baptist told people (*John 1:21*) he was not Elijah. Jesus was doing the things great prophets, like Elijah, had done in the past: give God's Word and perform powerful miracles. Since Jesus wasn't claiming to be the Christ, Elijah had to come first, and Jesus was doing the things a great prophet like Elijah did, it's no wonder the Jews thought Jesus was Elijah. The apostles illustrated these claims by their confusion right after Jesus confirms Peter's confession. The disciples wonder (*Matthew 17:10*) how it is possible that Jesus can really be the Christ when **the scribes say that Elijah must come first.**

²*John 7:26–52* occurred around the Feast of Tabernacles (*John 7:2*) the August before Christ's death.

³*Matthew 16:14; Mark 6:15; and Luke 9:8*

⁴Note the Jews evidently saw **the prophet** as someone different from both the Christ and Elijah — *John 1:20–21* and *7:40–42*. In any event, it would be impossible for people to think He were Elijah if He were claiming to be the Christ.

Final Reminder

I'm certainly not suggesting Jesus was not the Christ or that Jesus did not rise from the dead. My point is that nothing like the modern gospel was preached to the crowds Jesus ministered to, and we absolutely must keep this in mind when interpreting His teachings during that time.

Furthermore, since Jesus *did* have a gospel message, but that message did not include anything we normally associate with the gospel, we should be very curious what that message was and why it could be called **the gospel**. This information is critical if we are to really understand Christ's purpose and the reason for His death.

COMPARISON OF BIBLICAL AND CONSERVATIVE EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY

Biblical	Conservative Evangelical
<p>God judges people relative to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how they judge others (<i>Luke 6:37; James 2:13; Matthew 7:2; and John 9:41</i>) • their own enlightenment (<i>Matthew 23:29–33; John 15:22–24; Isaiah 65:12; Jeremiah 36:31; 1st Samuel 3:13; James 3:1; and the entire book of Zephaniah</i>) • their conscience (<i>Genesis 20:5–6; Romans 1:18–19; 1st Corinthians 8:10; and James 4:17</i>) • comparison with other humans (<i>Matthew 11:21–24; 23:29–33; and Luke 11:31–32</i>) 	<p>God judges people against a perfect standard no mortal can satisfy.</p>

The central truth is Jesus as King sent to turn God's people back to God as proved by His prophesied crucifixion and resurrection.

This is shown by too many verses to cite, but it is showcased where we expect to see the gospel portrayed most clearly: the conclusion of each gospel as well as the entirety of Acts. Particular verses include *Matthew 28:18; Mark 16:6; Luke 24:25–27; 45–48; John 20:29–30; 21:12–14; Acts 2:14–41; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 5:30–32; 10:34–43; 13:16–41; 17:2–4; 18:31; 22:1–21; and 26:1–29*

The central truth is that God is unable to forgive sin without sacrifice, so God sacrificed Jesus to Godself as a way to get around this limit on God's ability.

Biblical	Conservative Evangelical
<p>Christ's purpose is to call people out of spiritual bondage to serve God faithfully.</p> <p>This is the conclusion of Peter's pentecostal sermon: <i>Acts 3:26</i>, but is also found throughout the Bible (e.g., <i>Romans 6:4-6; Titus 2:14; Hebrews 9:14; 1st Peter 2:24; 1st John 3:4-5</i>). Jesus characterized this as His purpose during His earthly ministry as well (<i>Luke 5:32; 13:6-9; John 8:34-36</i>). Indeed, that was bulk of both Jesus' and John the Baptists' gospel — <i>Repent! for the time of the new covenant was at hand</i>. Throughout the prophets we see repentance as the crucial requirement for forgiveness that allowed a return to healthy covenant relationship with God.</p> <p>This exhortation to do God's will was exactly what Jesus and John preached before their deaths (<i>Matthew 3:2; 4:17; 5:19-20; 7:21; Mark 1:4; 15; 6:12; Luke 3:3; 6:46-49</i>), what Jesus told His disciples to preach afterward (<i>Luke 24:47</i>), and what the apostles themselves did preach (<i>Acts 3:19-20,26; 5:31; 11:18; 13:24</i>)</p>	<p>Christ's principal purpose was to save us from Hell.</p>
<p>Jesus is seen as protecting believers from the physical wrath God had prophesied upon the earth.</p>	<p>Jesus is seen as saving believers from His own righteous Judgment after the grand resurrection, which Revelation depicts as occurring only after God has poured physical, global wrath on the earth (twice), 1000 years after Christ's return.</p>
<p>Jesus' blood mediates the New Covenant prophesied in <i>Jeremiah 34:31-34</i> by sending the Holy Spirit to those who have received forgiveness through repentance and obey His commandments (<i>Luke 10:45; John 7:39; 16:7; Acts 2:38; 5:32; 8:30; 11:17-18; 15:9; 26:20; and Hebrews 6:4</i>)</p>	<p>The "New Covenant" is not clearly defined.</p>

Biblical	Conservative Evangelical
<p>Christ's blood allows Gentiles to enjoy the gift of the Holy Spirit through faith (<i>Galatians 3:14</i>), removing the wall of partition and hostility between Jews and Gentiles (<i>Ephesians 2:14</i>) so that the ordinances of the Mosaic law no longer deterred people from being in God's Kingdom (<i>Colossians 2:14</i>).</p> <p>While this blood allows those who convert to receive the Holy Spirit after receiving forgiveness for earlier sins through repentance, it does not work as a blanket atonement for ongoing sins of believers. Neither Christ's sacrifice nor those in the Old Testament worked forgiveness for intentional sins (<i>Numbers 15:30; John 5:29; Hebrews 10:26; 1st Corinthians 6:9-10; 2nd Corinthians 5:10; Colossians 3:24-25; Ephesians 5:4-5; Revelation 21:8</i>) Most of these were written to people who were already believers. Paul's own concern for his future in <i>1st Corinthians 9:24-27</i> and <i>Acts 24:15-16</i> should be a warning to any believer.</p>	<p>Jesus blood is seen as plenary payment of debt each individual owes toward God due to sins committed. Since the smallest debt toward God would leave one subject to wrath, and there is no way for anyone to atone for the smallest amount of wrong, a single unforgiven sin leaves one consigned to Hell.</p>
<p>There are many ways for someone to receive forgiveness:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forgiving others (<i>Matthew 6:14</i>) • Repentance (<i>2nd Chronicles 7:14; Jeremiah 36:3; Ezekiel 18:27; 33:14-16; Luke 3:3</i>; and many other verses already cited) • Church intervention (<i>John 20:23</i>) • Prayers of the righteous (<i>1st John 5:16</i>, and many, many times in the Old Testament) • Confession of sins (<i>1st John 1:9</i>) 	<p>The only way to have sins forgiven is through faith in Christ.</p>
<p>Note that many of these are available to people who have no understanding or knowledge of the gospel. Stephen prayed for the forgiveness of those who were stoning him. It is hard to understand why confession, having others pray for you, etc. are given as routes to forgiveness if those sins are assumed to already be forgiven through faith in Christ. (<i>James 5:14-16</i>)</p>	
<p>People can be pleasing to God through faith in God without any knowledge of the gospel of Christ. (Rahab [<i>James 2:25-26</i>], the denizens of Nineveh [<i>Jonah 3:9-10</i>], Cornelius before Peter arrived [<i>Acts 10:4</i>])</p>	<p>Only those with faith in Christ (not mere faith in God) can please God.</p>

Biblical	Conservative Evangelical
<p>Judgment is seen as an evaluation of disposition with the totality of one's actions, words, and thoughts considered. Believers are not dealt with any differently than non-believers. (<i>Matthew 7:21; 12:36-37; 13:49-50; 25:31-46; Luke 6:46; John 5:29; Acts 24:15-16; Romans 2:15-16; 1st Corinthians 9:24-27; 2nd Corinthians 5:10; Colossians 3:25; Hebrews 10:29; 2nd Peter 1:17; and Revelation 20:13</i>)</p>	<p>Judgment is seen as a trial where the principal question is whether someone is guilty of even one (unforgiven) sin.</p> <p>Believers are dealt with entirely differently than non-believers.</p>
<p>Jesus fulfills the promise made to Abraham and the covenant made to David. Gentiles are able to take part because through grace they become sons of Abraham. (<i>Isaiah 37:35; Jeremiah 23:5; 30:9; 33:15-21; Ezekiel 34:23-24; 37:24-25; Hosea 3:5; Amos 9:11; Matthew 1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30; 21:9; Mark 10:47-48; 11:10; Luke 1:27,32,69-76; 3:8; 13:16; 18:38-39; 19:9; 24:49; John 7:42; Acts 2:33-39; 3:25; 7:17; 13:23-24; 26:7; Romans 1:3; 4:16; 9:7; Galatians 3:7-8; 14:29; 2nd Timothy 2:8; Hebrews 2:16; Revelation 5:5; and 22:16</i>)</p>	<p>Jesus fulfills the curse in <i>Genesis 3:15</i> that explains why snakes have no legs. No gospel writer found this verse (or the fall in general) worth mentioning even once, nor does it show up in the evangelism shown in Acts, even when apostles brought the gospel to non-Jews. The single semi-reference in the New Testament (<i>Romans 16:20</i>) is set in the future, and it is God doing the crushing.</p>
<p>The fall of Adam is seen as the cause of spiritual death, human weakness to selfishness (<i>Romans 5:14; 6:6; and 7:15-25</i>)</p> <p>See <i>Romans 5:12</i> and <i>7:10</i> where Paul uses death in this way. It is not true that all died (physically) after Adam (Enoch[<i>Genesis 5:24</i>] and Elijah[<i>2nd Kings 2:11-12</i>] being examples of people who did not), and of course Paul had not died prior to writing the book of Romans but says that he died when the commandment came, for only through the commandment did temptation, and human domination by it, begin (<i>Romans 7:7-11</i>).</p>	<p>The fall of Adam is seen as the condemning the entire human race to eternal punishment.</p>

EARLY CHRISTIAN ATONEMENT

Evangelicals try to put their theory in early Christian mouths, suggesting *Penal Substitution*⁵ was taught in some form very early on. It wasn't.

Steve Jeffery, Micahel Ovey, and Andrew Sach spend 20 pages in *Pierced for Our Transgressions* quoting 13 of the most influential Christian leaders prior to Calvin. They claim these passages show overwhelming support for this theory throughout church history, but the quotes actually reflect the opposite.

No account before the late 4th century shows God *transferring* sin or its guilt to Christ. The early fathers saw Christ as *sharing* in our sin so we could *share* in His glorification, or else they got hung up on ideas where God paid Satan a “ransom” for humanity (an idea that lived in minor form into the 11th century!)

Even after the idea of transferral of sins gained some prominence (often in the same theories that gave Satan some role in salvation), it was not until the 16th century (!) that any writing is produced where it is *eternal damnation* that is being mitigated.

This should not be too surprising — recall how apostles focused on the *resurrection* not the Judgment.

The earliest theories of *atonement* describing God's work in Christ had nothing to do with legal figures or payment of debts. Early Christian thinkers claimed Jesus had taken humanity (as a whole) into His being. Therefore, since Christ beat death by His resurrection, humanity (united with Him by His incarnation) can now accomplish the same. Furthermore, since He rose again in power with a physical body, we can hope for the same.

There were different ideas about how exactly this defeat happened. But in general the early church thought the question was *How did Jesus thwart Satan or Death?* not *How did Jesus protect us from God's eternal wrath?* They were

⁵Penal Substitution is the term for the type of atonement most commonly taught by Evangelical churches. Christ's goodness is transferred to us. Our sins are transferred to Christ, and God punishes Christ for those sins at the cross. The “price” having been paid, and God's anger assuaged, there is therefore no condemnation for those in Christ.

trying to get around the universal principle that *All who sin must die*. This principle had to be reversed, somehow, for Christ to cheat Death and raise us.

For example, Athanasius⁶ believed it was possible to lead a sinless life. He believed Jeremiah and John the Baptist were examples of people who had. They still died since they inherited humanity's physical frailty; Adam's sin had caused humanity to lose the "divine image" which staved off decay.

Athanasius wrote that if it were merely our transgression against God that had to be dealt with, then simple repentance would be enough. Christ's sacrifice was needed to undo the corruption that Adam's deed had invoked into the human race. This general interest in the *effect*, but not the *guilt*, of original sin was quite prominent throughout the first 300 years of the church.

Athanasius also wrote, "He was made man that we might be made gods." Gregory of Nazianzus, the only major figure in the first millennium to attack wholeheartedly the "Jesus as ransom to Satan" idea, wrote, "That which was not assumed (by Christ) is not healed; but that which is united to God is saved."

Athanasius makes clear that the church taught this lifting up and deification to be effectual to all the world, not just believers: "For the presence of the Saviour in the flesh was the price of death and the saving of the whole creation."

There are several reasons it is hard for anything the early writers wrote to support the dogma of evangelicals:

- The focus was on the resurrection, not the Judgment.
- The church was primarily concerned with the principle articulated by Paul in *Romans 6:23* that **the wages of sin is death**. This means that Christ *shared* (with us) rather than *took* (from us) the penalty for sins. We do, after all, still die.
- Since Christ shared in our death to defeat death, it's hard to see how His work had anything to do with the Judgment because He did *not* suffer what we would otherwise suffer (i.e., hellfire according to current Christians).

⁶Athanasius was the most important Christian Father from 254 until 396. Origen, the premiere theologian prior to him, believed God paid Christ as a ransom to Satan, which is certainly not doing any favors to Evangelicals.