

*Delivered from the Elements of the World: Atonement, Justification, Mission*  
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## The Death That Changes Everything

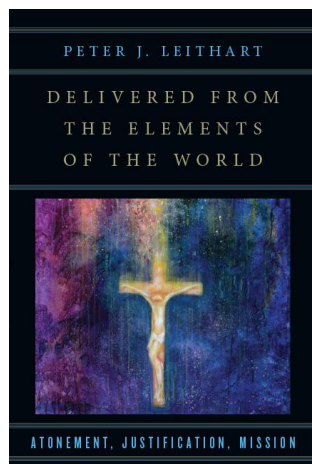
“How can the death and resurrection of a Jewish rabbi of the first century . . . be *the* decisive event in the history of humanity, the hinge and crux and crossroads for *everything*?” Peter J. Leithart delves into this question in *Delivered from the Elements of the World*, a wide-ranging study exploring how and why Jesus’ death and resurrection addresses the deepest realities of this world.

Paul’s phrase “the elements of the world” in Galatians 4:1-7 is the backdrop for Leithart’s assessment that atonement theology must be social theory. This biblical and theological examination of atonement and justification challenges conventional perceptions and probes the depths of the death that changes everything.

### Leithart’s study

- asks and answers how the death of Jesus became the hinge of history and changed everything
- investigates the biblical, theological, social and political dimensions of the atonement
- provides a definition of the atonement framed by several criteria: historical plausibility, Levitical, evangelical, Pauline, inevitable, fruitful
- explores the religious worldviews of the first-century world through Paul’s eyes
- interprets Paul’s meaning for “the elements of the world” as socio-religious
- explains the failings and limitations of flesh and Torah and how Jesus established a new way of living
- challenges conventional notions of justification
- establishes how God revealed his promised justice in Jesus
- relates how a theology of missions is inherent in an atonement theology that is social theory

“Leithart is like a lightning strike from a more ancient, more courageous Christian past, his flaming pen fueled by biblical acuity and scholarly rigor,” writes James K. A. Smith, professor of philosophy at Calvin College and editor of *Comment* magazine. “In this book, he does it again – here is the *City of God* written afresh for our age, asking a question you didn’t know to ask but now can’t avoid: Why is the cross the center of human history? Couldn’t God have found another way? Leithart’s answer – this book – is a monumental achievement.”



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## Atonement theology must be social theory.

Christians say that this event of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection—not the flood, exodus or return from exile—is the decisive moment for the salvation of the world. If it is comprehensible at all, the death of a supposed Messiah is not immediately comprehensible as a saving act, though resurrection is certainly good news for the dead Messiah himself. The problem is intensified when we add that this event is supposed to be the source of social, economic, and political justice and peace. The problem becomes nearly impossible when Christians say, as we often have over the years (starting with Jesus, Luke 24), that these events form the fitting, even the *inevitable* climax, to that comprehensible history of political judgment and deliverance we read about in the Old Testament. *This* is what Israel's history was all aiming at?

So: God destroys the world with water and rescues Noah; he demolishes Egypt and leads Israel through the sea to Sinai and to the land; he raises David and Solomon to glorify Israel among the nations; in his wrath, he casts Israel into exile, but then draws them back in love—he does all this, and the key to what this means is the life of a Galilean teacher crucified on a Roman cross, raised from the dead on the third day. *This* is the concluding chapter that ties up all the loose ends of the Bible's story?

Something *very* odd is going on here. Christianity's claim has become domesticated by its success, but to grasp the logic we need to *undomesticate* it and recover a sense of the word made strange. Either Christianity's good news is incomprehensible delusion, or it operates by a logic that violates much of the logic that we believe explains the world. It is either irrational, or it reveals that the world itself has a rationality quite different, more subtle and certainly odder than we believe.

This is not a book of apologetics, nor a history of theologies of the atonement. But I have been conscious that skepticism about the atonement found in Kant and, behind him, Faustus Socinius, has been central to modern assaults on the rationality of Christian faith. The attack on the rationality of the cross was an attack on the rationality of Christianity and the Bible. For Kant and many moderns, atonement theology was an invention of priests. *Real* atonement is self-help, repentant turning from evil and doing right. *That*, like the story of the fall, is perfectly comprehensible. It has all the clarity of, though less plausibility than, a fairy tale.

This has direct bearing on the social and political questions that animate this book, for if we can correct ourselves by our own natural powers, surely we are also capable of establishing social and political structures that embody the kingdom of God. Kant's Pelagian atonement



is intimately linked to Kant's advocacy of liberal political order. If, by contrast, Christians say that individuals can be put back on the track of justice only by the death and resurrection of Jesus, then we also raise a question over the adequacy of liberalism to achieve our political ends.

Satisfaction theories came under special criticism from Socinians and others, and penal substitution makes an appearance in what follows. I affirm it, with appropriate cautions and qualifications. More than cautions, I offer *context*, because we cannot make sense of Jesus' suffering the penalty for others' wrongs unless we see it as a summary of the plot of the gospel story. Jesus' substitutionary death is one moment in a *sequence* of redemptive acts, in a complex sacrificial act, and without the other moments before and after, it is no redemption at all. Isolating the moment of substitutionary death does havoc to our theology of atonement, our soteriology generally, not to mention our ecclesiology and sacramental theology and practice.

Thus, though I focus on the sociopolitical dimensions of the atonement, I hope that this focus illuminates traditional questions about the atonement. Indeed, I hope to show that atonement theology *must* be social theory, if it is going to have any coherence, relevance, or comprehensibility at all.

—Taken from chapter one, "Atonement As Social Theory"