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Media Contact:

Byron Belitsos

publicist@originpress.com

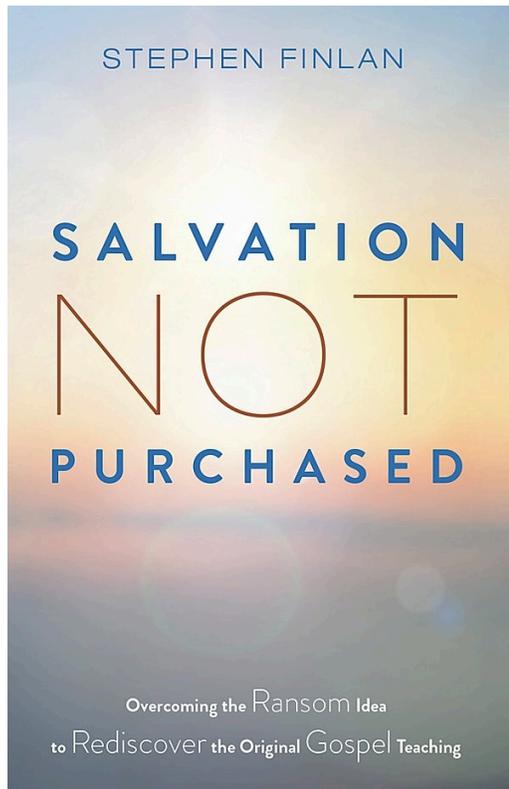
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Salvation Not Purchased:

*Overcoming the Ransom Idea
to Rediscover the Original Gospel Teaching*
Stephen Finlan

Cascade Books, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers
102 pages • 978-1-7252-5582-1 • Paperback: \$17 • eBook: \$9.99
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Many ministers and faithful Christians instinctively recoil from “washed in the blood” theology, but they hesitate to discuss the subject. This book by one of the world’s leading authorities on atonement doctrine shows *how* the “purchased by the blood” idea is out of step with the teachings of Jesus, who said that God reaches the pure in heart without any sacrificial payment. The successors of Paul took the Apostle Paul’s sacrificial metaphors far too literally and turned them into an imagined “mechanics” of salvation in which God is “paid off.” Over the centuries, this manipulative idea has been the source of confusion and mischief, from the anti-Semitic superstitions of the Middle Ages, to the pedagogy of shame taught in many fundamentalist churches today. Our understanding of Christ will be enhanced if we can recover the *original* apostolic Christology, which was based on Christ as Creator and life-giver.

Key tenets of *Salvation Not Purchased* include:

- Why blood atonement is inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus.
- The troubling implications of the notion of appeasing God’s anger.
- Import of decades of research by an authority on atonement doctrine.
- The link between dysfunctional family dynamics and atonement ideas.

Stephen Finlan has a Ph.D. in Pauline theology from University of Durham (U.K.) and taught theology for fourteen years at Fordham, Drew, and other universities. His nine books include the highly acclaimed *Problems with Atonement* (2005), one of his four academic titles on the atonement doctrine. He is also the author of *Bullying in the Churches* (2015), *The Family Metaphor in Jesus’ Teaching* (2013), and the co-editor of the groundbreaking *Theôsis: Deification in Christian Theology* (2006). He is the pastor at The First Church (UCC), West Bridgewater, MA.



"Stephen Finlan offers a lucid and thorough critique of the view that 'Christ died for our sins' is a central tenet of Christianity. . . A provocative and illuminating read for pastors and lay Christians alike."
—**Harold W. Attridge, Yale Divinity School**

"Must absolutely be read and reflected on by all who preach and presume to teach others how to preach the Christian doctrine of salvation."
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[Below please see: Q&A with the author,
a book excerpt, and more endorsements]

Q & A with author Stephen Finlan

Q: What is the main point of your book, *Salvation Not Purchased*?

A: I show how the “purchased by the blood” idea (known as “atonement”) is out of step with Jesus’ own teaching. Jesus proclaimed that the “pure in heart . . . will see God” (Matt 5:8), without any sacrificial payment mentioned. Atonement theologies usually do more to distort than to convey this clear gospel teaching.

Q: Does atonement really matter to the average person, or is it just an obscure debate among theological scholars?

A: No, it is a teaching that shapes how people think about God, the afterlife, and reward and punishment, both in the afterlife and within our families here. It helps shape our values—or mis-shape them.

Q: What, specifically, is wrong about atonement?

A: Actually, various people mean many different things by “atonement.” The idea to which I object is the notion that all humans are wholly evil and deserve damnation, that God was determined to punish humanity, but the innocent Son of God “paid” the penalty and received God’s wrath when he was nailed on the cross. Thus salvation is said to be purchased through Christ’s blood.

This is the Penal Substitutionary doctrine. It assumes God to be authoritarian and punishing. It goes right against Jesus’ teaching that “the Father himself loves you” (John 16:27), and that God is eager to save: “It is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). God does not need to be persuaded to be merciful.

Q: Isn’t the substitutionary atonement idea found in the Bible?

A: The seeds of the doctrine can indeed be found there. But the whole frightening doctrine of threatened damnation, substitution, and payment in blood is a distortion. The doctrine was formed by piecing together certain passages from Paul, other New Testament letters, Revelation, and two passages in the Gospels.

The Apostle Paul did teach that “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scripture” (1 Cor 15:3), and he used several metaphors to describe that death. He used three main metaphors for the death of Christ. The first metaphor is that Christ was sent as a sacrifice for sin (Rom 8:3; 1 Cor 5:7). Secondly, Paul used a scapegoat metaphor, for instance when he said Christ “becam[e] a curse for us” (Gal 3:13). This is not a sacrifice metaphor, since sacrifices were pure, and not accursed. Paul’s other main metaphor was redemption; in Rom 3:24 he used the word that refers to buying the freedom of a slave or a hostage. This metaphor would be particularly powerful for those who really were slaves and were hoping that someone would buy their freedom.

Paul would often mix two or three metaphors at a time, and this shows that he does not intend any one of them to be taken in a materialistic, literal way.

Q: Shouldn't we just accept what Paul wrote?

A: First of all, people have taken Paul's images too literally, forgetting that they are metaphors, descriptive word-pictures meant to communicate a message and not to be taken entirely literally. Further, believers often over-emphasize the atonement passages while failing to incorporate the many things Paul said about the Resurrection, and about spiritual growth, love, and transformation of believers. On those subjects, the Gospels and Paul are in full agreement. They both stress the idea of Christ as Life-Giver.

Q: Is transformation found mostly in the Gospels or in Paul?

A: In both, but Paul actually went into more detail. Speaking of the image of Christ, he said believers "are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:18). In contrast to many later Christian theologians, Paul taught that believers can really "be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God" (Rom 12:2). Jesus also said that believers can bear spiritual fruit and do the will of God (Matt 7:16–20; Mark 3:35; John 7:17).

Q: Can we accept Paul's good teachings, and reject his atonement teaching?

A: I think we should. At the least, Christians need to have a more well-informed and thoughtful understanding of Paul.

Q: You also said atonement was in two gospel passages.

A: One of those is the "ransom saying" found in Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28 ("the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many"). It occurs within a story that is present in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and in each case the message is about unselfish service. Luke 22:27, however, communicates this message without using the ransom saying, which is a non-essential part of the story, and is inconsistent with the rest of Jesus' teaching. The message of service belongs; the idea of ransom does not. I doubt that Jesus actually spoke of himself as a ransom.

The other gospel passage is the institution of the Eucharist as found in Matthew and Mark, which seems to reflect how the Eucharist was being practiced in the churches. You'll notice that I didn't mention Luke. The original version of Luke probably did not include the sentence "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). It is completely absent from the oldest Western Greek manuscript, and from the earliest translations of Luke into Latin and two other languages. Even in Greek manuscripts where the passage is present, it occurs in various different locations and varying wording, showing that the scribes struggled with this passage.

Q: Are you saying that Luke is the most accurate gospel, and the absence of the blood passage from Luke should be taken as most likely accurate?

A: On this subject, yes, Luke is the most accurate. The other gospels have their points of accuracy or antiquity on other issues. Really, we are lucky to have four early witnesses, but we have to triangulate with them, since none is a perfect tape recording. The gospels were written forty to seventy years after Jesus' resurrection in 30 AD.

The original apostolic message contained nothing about atonement. Look at Peter's sermons in the early chapters of Acts. He preached about Jesus the Messiah who was unjustly murdered, was raised from the dead, extended salvation, and offered the Holy Spirit to all. There is nothing about salvation being purchased, or of sin being transferred to Christ on the cross. The original apostolic Christology—the doctrine of Christ—had nothing to do with atonement.

Q: What do you mean by the “original apostolic Christology”?

A: This is the understanding of Christ as Creator, possessing the divine power to create life: “In him all things in heaven and on earth were created” (Col 1:16). “He also created the worlds” (Heb 1:2). In these and other passages, Jesus is the creative agent through whom God created the worlds. If Jesus could actually create life, it is not surprising that he could perform “miracles” that, after all, had to do with restoring life. Jesus saves us because of who he is—the Life Giver—not because of what was done to him.

Q: Why was Jesus killed, then?

A: He was killed by religious authorities who were jealously protecting their turf, including their control of the sacrificial ritual. The priests felt threatened by Jesus offering salvation directly to the people, without sacrifice or priesthood. He had a spiritual and liberating power they did not have. Religious leaders down through the ages—including Christians—have often conspired against those who seem to challenge their power.

Q: How was Jesus different?

A: He rejected power over others, and taught his disciples not to exercise such power. Rather, “the greatest among you must become like . . . one who serves” (Luke 22:26). We are to be “merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). God is not domineering and violent, and we should not be, either.

An Excerpt from *Salvation Not Purchased*

The main problem with teaching that Jesus' death paid for human sin is that it slanders the character of God the Father! If God was either unable or unwilling to forgive without a payment in blood, then God was either weak or cruel. Both are false. God was not compelled to demand that a payment for sin be made, nor was God defending God's honor. Such ideas emerge when people apply human laws and attitudes to God.

“Somebody had to pay for human sin” is based on a series of mistaken assumptions. One is that God is stern and demanding, while Jesus is merciful and kind. This goes against Jesus' own teachings about his similarity to the Father: “Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life . . . Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 5:21; 14:9). There is no spiritual contrast between the Father and the Son; they have the same love. This is the good news: the circuit of love that flows from the Father, through the Son, to the Spirit, and into us.

Of course, no Christian wants to say that God is either cruel or weak. Yet Christians commonly fall into that trap unawares, accepting formulas that Christian authorities have told them they must believe, usually accompanied with a fierce and angry energy. Most believers follow their leaders. Instead, we should reflect upon what we have been taught, and see if it needs to be questioned, in the light of Jesus' own focus on love and forgiveness. What did Jesus himself teach about salvation?

Salvation Now

Jesus made it clear, in his preaching and ministry, that the kingdom of God has come; it is here. Jesus built people up spiritually and told them they were already saved by their exercise of faith. There are seven times in the gospels where he tells people “your faith has saved you,” even when he has performed a miraculous healing for them. I am counting the times the NRSV renders it “faith has made you well” (such as Matt 9:22; Luke 7:50), as well as the times they translate the same verb as “has saved.” The verb is $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ (*sōzō*), which has the primary meaning of “saved.”

By no means am I arguing that people are self-saving. Rather, I am saying that Jesus generously gives them credit for their faith, their role in receiving salvation. Actually, salvation results from both the divine downreach and the human upreach: the coming together of God's love (embodied by Jesus) and a person's sincere and faithful plea. Jesus does do miracles of healing, but he likes to lift people up and include them. Jesus certainly is the Savior and the Healer, but he likes to acknowledge the human receptivity to God.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus saves people, and tells them they are saved without any reference to his coming death, or any substitutionary doctrine. The way to salvation and eternal life is wide open. Salvation is made available here and now, whenever people “hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance” (Luke 8:15). Notice how crucial is the “honest and good heart”—the sincerity of the person. Jesus is the Savior in exactly the same way that he is the Creator (“Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made,” John 1:3). He extends salvation just as he extended healing. In fact, the main images for salvation in the gospels are healing and restoration. His healings were a gift of life, or a restoration of healthy life. There is no magic in the crucifixion; he did not become the Savior only after he was murdered.

More Praise for *Salvation Not Purchased*

“Stephen Finlan offers a lucid and thorough critique of the view that ‘Christ died for our sins’ is a central tenet of Christianity. He shows that neither Jesus himself, nor much of the New Testament, nor the Greek patristic tradition thought so. Sacrificial metaphors, used in diverse ways by the apostle Paul, had an afterlife in Christian theology, abetted by psychological and social needs. This will be a provocative and illuminating read for pastors and lay Christians alike.”

—Harold W. Attridge, Yale Divinity School

“Passionately rejecting those aspects of traditional atonement theory that implicitly turn God into a severe, sacrifice-demanding Father, and instead, pointing out the biblical evidence that reveals the original teaching of Jesus as emphasizing a generous and merciful loving God, Stephen Finlan’s remarkable slim volume, *Salvation Not Purchased*, must absolutely be read and reflected on by all who preach and presume to teach others how to preach the Christian doctrine of salvation.”

—Robert J. Daly, SJ, Boston College

“By putting—and keeping—Jesus square at the center, Stephen Finlan gives us an extraordinarily helpful treatment of atonement theology. *Salvation Not Purchased* is concise and accessible, but also rich in detail and analytically strong. Finlan starts with the right question—what do we learn from Jesus’s life and teaching about salvation?—and then shows how satisfaction atonement theology distorts the gospel. A book with strong ethical implications.”

—Ted Grimsrud, Eastern Mennonite University

“In this book, Stephen Finlan redeems the traditional theories of atonement and hell by ridding them of their manipulative ‘bad news’ gospel message that depends solely on the economic sacrifice of an innocent victim before God can or will forgive sin. Instead, by exploring the Bible in its original languages and contexts, Finlan offers readers a gospel message that is truly good news from beginning to end. He presents these significant and provocative ideas with a pastoral heart and extends to his readers practical suggestions for living out the good news for the glory of God and for the furtherance of the divine kingdom. *Salvation Not Purchased* is a beautifully written, accessible, practical, and theologically stimulating book, one that I plan on using with church groups and in my undergraduate college courses.”

—Sharon Baker Putt, Messiah College