Dallas Willard needs no introduction to the readers of Conversations. After all, he is responsible for the fact that our five sections correspond to his components of the person—and that we try to hear from a representative of each of the six great traditions of Christian faith in each issue. He is also responsible for the fact that I, for one, have come to believe it is actually possible to become like Jesus. I believe it because I see the way Dallas lives his life.
Dallas Willard is on a quiet quest to subvert normal Christianity. The Divine Conspiracy, you reference the commonly held variation on this theory, Penal Substitution, and Moral Influence?

GWM: The Ransom theory has a great strength to it because it fits a well-known social and even political model of redemption, where someone is captive and an arrangement is made to pay off the one who is holding the captive. Now, there has been a lot of bouncing around as to whether it is Satan or sin or God who has us captive and as to who has to be paid off. But the theme of being a captive and being set free is fundamental to the core of Christian salvation.

GWM: Would you agree with Anselm that a major stumbling block might be that if the ransom is paid to Satan, it raises questions as to who is in charge here?

GWM: Yes. The Ransom theory has been the longest standing theory—one from the university of Southern California and one from the university of Georgia. While some (okay, just me) think he made a mistake in picking USC, he has had an amazing academic and ministry career. Some refer to him as America’s C. S. Lewis.

GWM: Dallas, in The Divine Conspiracy, you reference statistics indicating that while most Americans believe there is a God and they negotiate their way, “They basically running their lives on theirs tries to explain, and when you have to deal with a stubborn fact, then your theories have a limited range, and I think that is why you have these three basic envelopes. Fundamentally, these are three ways of trying to understand the fact that Christ died for our sins and that somehow we are saved by what He did.

GWM: I like it that you say “somehow,” but I suspect that might make some nervous. Would you mind comment- ing on what you believe to be a primary strength and weakness of each of the three most prominent theories/metaphors of atonement—Ransom, Satisfaction (including the commonly held variation on this theory, Penal Substitution), and Moral Influence?

GWM: The Ransom theory has a great strength to it because it is done, things must be made right, and that’s the strength of the Penal theory. All of these theories, if they are not taken too narrowly, have an important truth to them. It is true that human beings have sinned, and this sin is ultimately an offense against God. The question is how this can be set right. The Penal/Substitutionary theory—one does need to choose a theory that “slash” in there, because substitutionary theories need not be penal. And actually, substitution is really present in all of these theories except some very weak forms of moral influence theories. But, and this is a weakness, once again you see what the human mind does—ske miscle anything that it understands and says, “Oh, this is like that.” So the theory comes along and says, “Oh, I know what happened. This death on our behalf is like that; that is to say, punishment was paid to Satan, it raises questions as to who is in real existence and without power over daily life.”

I agree. The Ransom theory has been the longest stand- ing theory—one from the university of Southern California and one from the university of Georgia. While some (okay, just me) think he made a mistake in picking USC, he has had an amazing academic and ministry career. Some refer to him as America’s C. S. Lewis.

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A good way of putting this is to say that atonement is basically incarnation. Incarnation is Christ coming into flesh to allow us to identify with Him in His life and ministry and in the cross and in life beyond the cross.

That’s exactly right. It gives a terrible picture of God, and it isn’t reconcilable with Scripture or with what Jesus taught about or practiced about God, or what the relationship to God through the ages has meant for those who are alive in Christ. And, so, the human mind makes a model and says, “This is like that.” And then you are stuck with that if you don’t have a larger view and basically one that incorporates all three of the alternatives that you have set out.

Very helpful. What about the Moral Influence view?

The Moral Influence view is basically a view that leaves the large cosmic order—whether involving Satan or God—untouched, and it basically says, “Well, Christ came into the world as a moral influence,” and that’s true, but it depends on how you take it. What people have normally done is make it free of its cosmic setting and make it [as if] Christ is only human and has an influence simply by His excellence as a human being, including giving up His life on the cross. The one-sidedness again is obvious.

Yes, “While you—congregant in the pew—must forgive 70 times 7 times, I—God—must have my wrath appeased when someone messes up.”

That’s absolutely right. Each of these theories has a flaw in that it identifies something and says, “That’s the whole thing.” That is the underlying mistake when you try to take a fact and force it onto a theory. That’s attractive because human beings want to control the fact, and they do that by developing a large or theory that makes sense to them, given the whole background of their ideas and social realities. But that can miss the point. Christ was not just any old person, but He was a true prince of the cosmos. His death, then, is not like the death of any ordinary person.

Is there a parallel between these theories or metaphors for atonement and the streams of RENOVARÉ—that is, would we stand to benefit by drinking from the best of each instead of choosing sides?

I think actually, something could be done with that, but you still have to deal with the “dark side” of each one and its deficiencies, and I think you are always going to be troubled if you stay at the level of theories, even if you have several good ones, because atonement is, in the last analysis, a matter of our fellowship with Christ, the person.

They are distinct but inseparable. Justification means the restoration of a relationship. And, by the way, I think it’s very unfortunate the way we use this word and say, “It’s just as if I’d never sinned.” It will never be that way. I will always be a redeemed sinner, and that’s going to be part of the mental and spiritual furniture that helps me live before God for eternity. It will never be “just as if I had never sinned.” Now, there is a resumption of relationship, which you can describe as “peace with God” or “being reconciled to God” or “God being reconciled to man,” and that part is justification.

So, if justification is about forgiveness and restoration of relationship, where does atonement come in?

Atonement is God’s act that makes this possible, and that act is the giving of His Son. The giving of His Son is much bigger than His Son’s death on the cross.

When we read John 3:16, [we] have to understand that the whole passage is not about forgiveness. It is about life that comes in Christ—not just the act of atonement; that is a gift. It is not separable from our faith in Christ or from justification. This is rather difficult to make clear, but justification is not just a forensic act. It is a declaration before God, but it is not just a credit transfer; it is God’s act of entering our life, and that’s what John 3:16 is about. It’s about life from above, and that is atonement.

This is helpful, but the two still keep running together in my mind—and maybe I should just leave them together and not try to force even the subtle distinction between justification and atonement. But do I hear you placing a little more importance on the incarnation with atonement?

Yes. You have to see the death of Christ as a necessary part of the giving of His Son to humanity. And, as Paul says, there is one God and one mediator between God and man… the man, Christ Jesus. So now atonement is the resurrection of life.
Do you think Jesus was talking about atonement in all the union passages in John 15 through 17?

Well, that's the idea of union in one's life.

So please put this in the context of how, as you say, salvation is ultimately our “life with God.”

Salvation is, biblically speaking, deliverance. It is a condition of being delivered from sin and, with that, guilt—but primarily the emphasis is on being delivered from sin. How we understand that is what matters. Some people, of course, depending on their theory, understand it as in the Penal theory: that now your sins are paid off and you have a kind of contract with God that you will not be punished for your sins. But in the biblical/New Testament picture, I think, what you have presented is salvation as a form of life [with God]. And that, I think, is what John and Paul and the New Testament generally understand it to be—that people now have a life above, and their salvation, their deliverance, is a matter of having that life and living that life with God.

Salvation is participating in a transforming friendship with the Trinity.

That's an excellent way of putting it.

But as you know, if you aren't careful, you just sort of slip out of the substance of that, and you wind up with a very thin Moral Influence theory rather than an accommodation of union. So please put this in the context of how, as you say, salvation is ultimately our “life with God.”

Salvation is the life of the Son of God in you. That is where, of course, the “vine and the branches” figure comes in and Paul's constant teachings about our unity with Christ, a kind of dynamic pursuit of Christ, and that involves your whole life. So that is incarnation that involves your whole life. So that is incarnation that involves your whole life. So that is incarnation that involves your whole life.

Salvation is participating in a transforming friendship with the Trinity.

That was wonderful. In fact, for the rest of our questions, let's just pretend I am your granddaughter asking these.

So, with that in mind, if Jesus' death on a cross and resurrection conquered sin, how would you explain the Holocaust to a rabbit? Or more simply, how would you explain the obvious presence of sin in the world after the death and resurrection of Jesus?

That was wonderful. In fact, for the rest of our questions, let’s just pretend I am your granddaughter asking these.

Well, the death and resurrection of Jesus do not impose a necessity; they open a possibility. The continued presence of human beings en masse to kill others en masse is a permanent fixture of a world in which they (human beings) are living on their own in alienation from God.

And that [alienation] is why I like thinking about sin—and I hope this is not heretical—as separation, and salvation as the journey toward union or the experience of union. So Jesus' death on the cross makes it possible for union, the journey of being with Him, living your life with Him. But even with all that is offered, even if you've gone down front at a Billy Graham crusade, you can still go back to living separate from God.

That is the issue of spiritual growth. So now, let us say you have placed your faith in Christ and He has given you new life—that doesn't mean you are all fixed up. You still have the issue of growth, and it looks like that is an eternal project, and it will go on forever. So, that's where you need the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and life in the Kingdom. And you need to understand all of the aspects of you as a human being [thinkin', feeling, choosing, relating, etc.] and how redemption comes into them by your discipleship to Christ and growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

You see, if we have a version of the atonement that is independent of spiritual growth, and frankly, all three theories tend to leave you there, then you are going to sort of say, well, we even have “the finished work of Christ on the cross.”

Christ's work on the cross was not the end?

No.

I knew that, but I'm trying to help you out.

Christ's work on the cross was the end. Now, there was something finished. Primarily, it was, in the biblical sense, the days of His flesh were finished. But to think that redemption was finished or that everything needed for salvation was finished is simply a brutal misunderstanding of the New Testament teaching about the life of Christ.

Kay, no more slow pitches. Dallas, what is your concept of hell?

My concept of hell is very simple. It is God's best for some people. It is the best God can do for those who don't like Him. The worst would be to make them be with Him. Now, what that means is separation from God because people in hell want to be away from God, and not with God.

Hell is not something God enjoys. He is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to everlasting life. That is His wish. God is not trying to keep people from heaven; he is trying to get them in, and I believe that He will admit anyone who, in His judgment, can stand it—and I'm not being funny. That is deadly serious. For God, this isn't play time. This business of being in heaven is very serious indeed. If you got there and found you didn't like God—well, actually, most people don't like God—that would be a problem. In heaven you're going to be right up against Him constantly, forever. You have to be ready for that. People that don't like God enough to seek Him and spend time with Him here are very likely to find heaven utterly agonizing.

I've heard you comment on this in a way that reminds me very much of how my Uncle Otis, a faith-healing evangelist, would say it. He was asked, “Who goes to heaven?” He would answer something like, “Everybody who can stand that much love.” And when asked, “Who goes to hell?” he responded, “Only those who will have it no other way.”

Yes, that's exactly right.

I knew he got that from you.

You see, the problem is we have all the imagery that comes to us from an uninspired tradition. A lot of this is pagan, and it's borrowed from pictures of volcanoes and lava flowing, and all that sort of thing—sulfur, and so forth. You don't want to have images of atonement and hell that give us a God who is fundamentally mean.

I used to minister down in Texas with a dear old brother who, when he got to preaching on hell, [made] you [want] to hide under the seats and hope God wouldn't find you. He used to say, “God's gonna skip them sinners across the lake of fire like a boy skips a rock across a pond.” He was giving a picture of a God who enjoys the misery of the lost. It was as bad as the picture of a God that has got a big whuppin' in Him, and He takes it out on Jesus so we don't have a whuppin' coming.

These are just incredibly terrible images of God, and you end up with people who are thinking the miracle is that God loves me. No, no—the miracle would be if He didn't love you because He is a God of love, not a God of wrath who occasionally “lets up.”
You don’t want to have images of atonement and hell that give us a God who is fundamentally mean.

Dallas, I think I’ve warned you that I’m a compulsive summarizer. I like to think about salvation and the differences between justification, atonement, and salvation in terms of verb tenses. In terms of the past, I see the incarnation and the cross of Christ coming into focus. That is where I would place justification and forgiveness—the incarnation of Christ, the cross of Christ, makes possible justification and forgiveness. As you said, “justification is the front door.”

In the present, I think more in terms of my own personal cross. And I’m not talking about “a pebble in my shoe,” but whether or not I am willing to crawl on the altar as a living sacrifice and, in the present, die to the desire for any will apart from the will of Christ, and the desire for the living Christ—because of His death and resurrection—to be incarnate in me. I think of atonement this way: in terms of accepting my personal cross that my new life can begin with God living His life with and through me, living more and more moments by way of personal incarnation of the power and spirit of Christ in me. I think about the future in the sense that salvation as an ongoing process, but ultimately there is the deliverance—through an ongoing journey with God in which I’m becoming more like Him. I love the idea of salvation as a journey toward union with God.

So stop me if I’m wrong, but I’ve come to view justification a little more in terms of the cross of Christ and forgiveness of sins; atonement is living my life with God in the present, animated by the power, presence, energy, and love of Christ—all looking toward a future where salvation is deliverance and, as John 17:3 states, intimately “knowing” God.

I like that, Gary. It is a manner in thinking about these terms and arranging a number of different things in a coherent relationship. I guess my only worry about doing this is that I view justification as only in the past. I believe you must also relate it to ongoing and eventual salvation.

Justification is, then, more than the front door.

Yes, that’s why I would [also] put justification as an effect of regeneration. It has a forensic attitude, but justification is basically the way God treats people to whom He has given life from above. What are you going to do with it? Well, that’s where justification comes in. I’m not going to hold their sins against them because now we have a new principle that is a life, and I think that’s how Abraham was justified by faith and so on. So, it depends on how you handle the details of justification, and, of course, there is a lot of room for work on that.

Before we stop, please underline what you mean when you say it is essential not to equate justification and atonement. Is it because if you do that, you might miss the notion of salvation as a life?

You will certainly miss it, and as a result of that, you are going to cut salvation off from life, and I think that, among other things, that is a basic falsification of the message of the New Testament and of the salvation that Jesus Himself announced and called people to—of life in the Kingdom of God.

That might be the best single answer for why non-transformation is the elephant in the sanctuary, as you put it?

It is now. Theologically, we latched onto the idea that you can accept justification through the death of Christ, and then for the ordinary person there is no connection beyond that to anything else. It doesn’t have to be that way, but that’s the way it has turned out.

Thank you for being so generous with your time and for offering us both the diagnosis and the treatment for the elephant in the sanctuary problem. If I heard you correctly, the diagnosis is that we can “get saved” without this necessarily meaning that an active agent of change is in our lives—without daily participating in a transforming friendship with the Trinity. We can become “Christians” without becoming disciples/apprentices. The treatment is to approach salvation as a life with God, a life of obedience, incarnate with the presence, power, and love of Jesus. To use your words: “Salvation is the life of the Son of God in you.”

Moving to the practical, if you don’t mind, are there a few things you do every day in your own apprenticeship program? What is your own way of living out salvation as a life?

Well, the main objective, and I will come back to what I do, is to keep the Lord at my right hand or, to use another biblical image, always before me. So my objective is to go through my day with God.

Now, some of the things that I do [that help with this] are, that, routinely, when I wake up in the morning and often before I get up out of bed, I will work through the Lord’s Prayer and the 23rd Psalm a couple of times, and then as I get up, I will make it my practice to be thankful and to ask God to be with me as I go through the day.

Beyond that, it depends on what the day is, but I return to the conscious invocation of God periodically as I go through the day. I try to keep that alive—and of course, having memorized a great deal of Scripture, being committed to service, to those that I’m with [and so on], are helpful things to keep that alive.

It sounds like your quiet time gets extended a bit.

My main problem with “quiet time” is that I want my whole day to be quiet. I don’t go into quiet time to be something that I have and then depart from into “noisy time.” No, my main business is to make the whole day “quiet time.”

So, given the day, I may have an extended time of the study of Scripture or prayer, but that depends upon which day it is because some days, I simply can’t do that. And I don’t think there is anything wrong with that. There would be something wrong if on those days I took a vacation [from being with God], but I don’t do that. Jesus said He would be with us always, and that’s the center, Gary, of what I try to do. I try to be with Him.

I have other periodic things like fasting. I try to fast some period of time each week and do longer fasts periodically. Then, of course, worship and all of the things that we might think about on a periodic basis, but my objective is to have the Lord always with me.