

# Why Did Jesus Die?

## Exploring the Multifaceted Biblical Doctrine of the Atonement from a Biblical Unitarian Perspective

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### Abstract

In part one, I categorize and summarize what the New Testament documents say about the purpose of Christ's death, enumerating eight reasons: Jesus died to provide eternal life, to reconcile us to God, to express love, to defeat evil, to provide an example, to justify us apart from the Law, to free us from sin to live righteously, and for our sins. These biblical reasons are non-negotiable for any biblical atonement theory—not that each must find representation in a given theory, but that a theory should not contradict any of them. Next I consider seven atonement theories and evaluate each, including (1) ransom, (2) Christus victor, (3) moral exemplar, (4) satisfaction, (5) penal substitution, (6) governmental, and (7) communal substitution. Between theories (4) and (5) I take an excursus to consider advantages and disadvantages of believing in Christ's deity in the context of atonement. In the end I suggest my own theory, drawing on (5), (6), and (7).

### Introduction

It's in our songs, on our cars, around our necks, and on our walls both physical and cyber. The cross of Christ dominates Christian symbolism, theology, and sermons. Yet, we often misunderstand the atonement—how Christ's death makes us right with God—or reduce it to one dimension like a pearl when, in fact, it is much more like a multifaceted gem. Originally, I thought I would present one atonement theory, the one that clearly outshone the others, and be done with it. However, in the course of researching the options, I kept discovering more ways to think about it, though no one source listed out all the major theories. Of course, it is nearly impossible to discern which way of thinking about a doctrine is best without knowing the primary choices. Furthermore, I noticed a tendency to conflate what the bible teaches with the theories themselves. The scriptures are the foundation on which we must build any doctrine, but neat systematic theologies tend to teeter on its uneven surface. Consequently, I decided to accomplish two separate though related pairs of tasks: (1) categorize and summarize what the bible says Jesus' death accomplished and (2) present and evaluate each of the main atonement theories.

Although in what follows I will focus, almost exclusively, on Christ's death (hence the title), I do not want to in any way insinuate that his life, especially his teachings and healing ministry, are not of utmost importance, since, after all, as Vernon Grounds put it, "His death exegetes his teaching."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, I do not claim to have either exhausted the subject or laid down an authoritative position, binding for all biblical unitarians or serious bible students. This is my initial foray into the doctrine and as such what I suggest in the conclusion is tentative and subject to revision. I welcome feedback, whether objections or constructive criticisms.<sup>2</sup>

## Part One: Biblical Reasons Jesus Died

When Christian thinkers discuss the atonement, generally they begin by laying out the various popular theories: moral exemplar, satisfaction, penal substitution, etc. Then they evaluate each based on its merits, explanatory power, coherence with the bible, logical consistency, and so on. I want to begin a little differently. My first question is not, "What atonement theories do Christians put forward?" but, "What does the bible say about Jesus' death?" In an effort to answer that question, I have surveyed the New Testament (henceforth, NT) to find the relevant texts on this subject.<sup>3</sup> In categorizing the texts, I came to realize how difficult it is to pull these aspects of

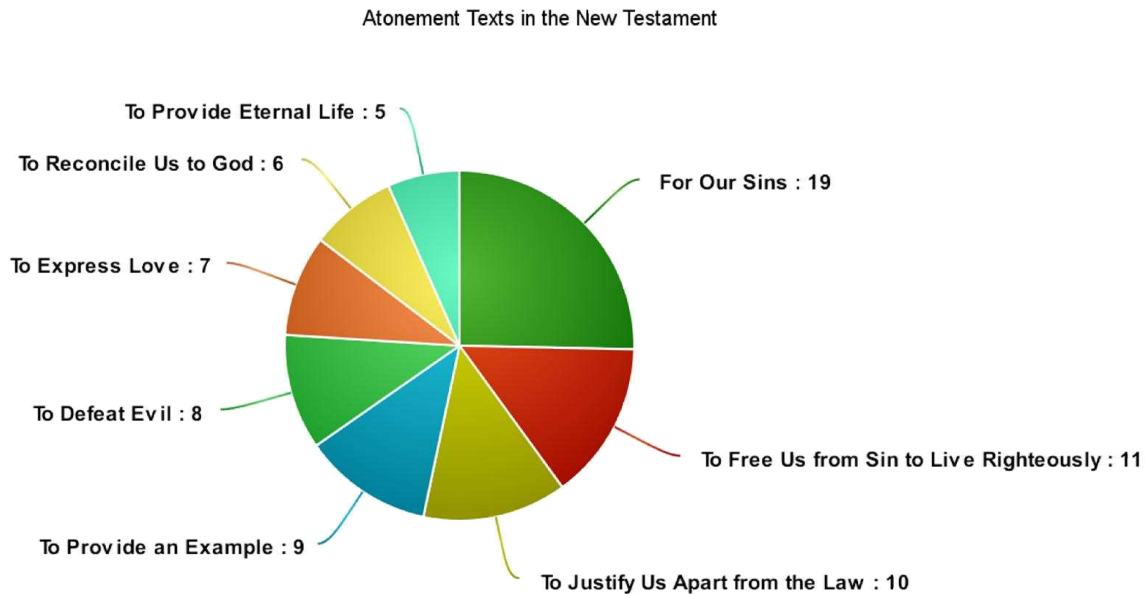
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<sup>1</sup> Vernon C. Grounds, "Atonement," in *Wycliffe Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Carl F. Henry (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Send me email at sean@restitutio.org.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, a complete biblical theology of atonement must take into consideration what the Hebrew bible says on the subject, as well. I will integrate relevant passages from the Old Testament as needed, though a thorough examination is beyond the purview of this work.

atonement out from their native environments, since so often several distinct categories overlap and intertwine. Thus, what I present below in the pie chart is necessarily, to some degree, artificial, though it does illustrate how I organized my approach to the unruly biblical data. Here is a representation of the eight aspects of Christ's atonement in the NT:



I will explain each of these briefly, before going on to consider overarching atonement theories and presenting a modified version of Joshua Thurow's communal substitution idea. I will take each of these eight charted above in order from the least represented to the most.

### 1. Jesus Died to Provide Eternal Life<sup>4</sup>

Quite a number of NT texts talk about eternal life, however only a handful explicitly connect Jesus' death with providing eternal life for those who believe.<sup>5</sup> I was certainly surprised to discover that this category was the least attested. Even so, it is extremely significant since, otherwise, Christ's death might enable forgiveness, but we would only enjoy reconciliation during this life. However, Jesus' death not only deals with the past and present, but also the future in that it paves the way to the kingdom of God. In the song of the lamb in Revelation, we see how Jesus' death relates to eternal life clearly:

Revelation 5.9-10<sup>6</sup>

9 And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, 10 and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

The lamb uses his blood to buy people of every kind. The purpose of purchasing them is to make them into a kingdom, reigning upon the earth. We know from other texts that the kingdom itself is eternal and that God's people will possess it forever (cf. Dan 7.18, 27; Mat 25.34, 46; Luke 18.29-30; Rev 2.26-27; 22.5; etc.).

### 2. Jesus Died to Reconcile Us to God<sup>7</sup>

Because of our dysfunction, destructiveness, and disobedience to God's commands, we have alienated ourselves from God. We have gone astray in a series of rebellions from our first parents until today. We, as Paul put it, were

<sup>4</sup> John 3.16; Rom 5.21; 1 Thes 4.10; Rev 1.5-6; 5.9-10

<sup>5</sup> Of course, I realize that the many texts that explain Jesus' death for our sins could also apply to the subject of eternal life, since our sins keep us out of the age to come, but I keep these two categories separate here.

<sup>6</sup> All scripture references are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (ESV)* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Rom 5.10; 2 Cor 5.18; Eph 2.13-16; Col 1.20-22; 1 Pet 3.18; Heb 10.19

“alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds” (Col 1.21) or as he says elsewhere, “We all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph 2.3). For Gentiles, the situation is even direr, for we were “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2.11-12). As Gentiles, we lacked access to God.

Christ’s death repairs our broken relationship with God. Here are a few ways the NT expresses this glorious truth:  
Colossians 1.19-22

19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. 21 And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him

Ephesians 2.13-16

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Jesus suffered so that “he might bring us to God” (1 Pet 3.18). As a result, we can have “confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus” (Heb 10.19). We take having access to God for granted, but it was not always available. Even Israel was not able to boldly approach God’s presence. The temple illustrated how separated humanity was from God. The Gentiles were in the outermost courtyard; Israel came closer, but only the priests could enter the temple itself, and only at certain times to perform particular rites. Into God’s innermost holy place, only the high priest could visit, and only once a year, and not without blood to cover his own sins. These hostile, dividing walls, came down in Christ’s death making it possible for both Jews and Gentiles to “have access in one spirit to the Father” (Eph 2.18). Alas we, Gentiles, are “no longer strangers and aliens, but...fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph 2.19).

### 3. Jesus Died to Express Love<sup>8</sup>

The *textus classicus* for this idea is indubitably John 3.16, wherein we read “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son.” Thus, through giving his only son (or only begotten son) God expresses his love to the whole world. This is a supreme act of costly love. I imagine God would have died for our sins if he could, but alas he is immortal, consequently, he is incapable of experiencing death.<sup>9</sup> What is more excruciating than giving up one’s only child to torment and death? I can think of nothing more difficult. I can’t imagine how torturous it must have been for the almighty himself to watch helplessly as his beloved son in whom he was well pleased suffered mockery, public humiliation, searing pain, and ultimately death itself. A being who could annihilate everyone on Golgotha as easily as we swat a fly had to sit on his hands and watch. Such agony is hard to comprehend, but he willingly endured it, as grueling as it was, because of his love for all those who would benefit from it. Henceforth, this unmatched act demonstrates how much God loves the world.

Now, Jesus was neither a naïve little boy nor a pawn unaware of the big picture when he carried out his Father’s wishes; he was a full grown man who understood the reasoning behind the act and freely volunteered for the mission. Thus, his death not only indicates how “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5.8), but also it points to how Christ himself courageously “loved us and freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev 1.5). Such love inspires and woos us, drawing us toward such a savior and such a God.

### 4. Jesus Died to Defeat Evil<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> John 3.16; Rom 5.8; 8.32; Gal 2.19-20; Eph 2.4-7; 1 John 4.9-10; Rev 1.5

<sup>9</sup> We see that God is immortal in these texts: Rom 1.23; 1 Tim 1.17; 6.16. I will return to evaluate how believing in Christ’s deity changes atonement theology in an excursus in part two.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Cor 2.8; Gal 1.4; Col 1.13-14; 2.15; Heb 2.14-15; 1 John 3.8; Rev 12.11

Through death, Jesus rendered powerless him who had the power of death (Heb 2.14). Although it may have seemed to everyone present at his crucifixion that Jesus was on display as a spectacle, in fact, his suffering disarmed the rulers and authorities, making a public display of them (Col 2.15). Through the blood of the cross, it was the Father's good pleasure to reconcile all things to himself whether on earth or in heaven (Col 1.19-20). More than merely defeating demons for his own benefit, Christ's death liberated and empowered all whom the old regime had ensnared and subjugated.

We are no longer bound prisoners in the domain of darkness, but God has "transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1.13-14). No longer do we need to dance to the drumbeat of the devil, as we did before (Eph 2.1-3). Christ has liberated us not only from death itself but even the fear of death (Heb 2.14). By suffering the effects of the serpent's venom, he defanged the devil, rendering him powerless to bite his followers. He came to "destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8), freeing his people from evil. We now take on the same mission that Jesus had of opening people's eyes so that they can turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God (Acts 26:18). Satan is defeated! Christ is victorious! We are free!

### 5. Jesus Died to Provide an Example<sup>11</sup>

Christ's heroic death both inspires us and teaches us. For example, the famous *carmen Christi* points to Christ's humbling death on the cross as both the prerequisite for his exaltation as well as a premium example for the Christ-followers living at Philippi:

Philippians 2.4-10

4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name...

Thus, Jesus' ordeal serves not only as something to benefit those who believe in him, but also as an example on how we should put others' interests ahead of our own. We ought to "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Eph 5.2). What more fitting model is there than someone who willingly gives his life for the sake of others? Hebrews, likewise, looks to the cross as a practical pattern for us to follow in our effort to "run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb 12.1-2). We should "consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself" so we don't give up or lose heart (Heb 12.3). After all, whatever we go through, chances are it isn't nearly as bad as what he bore. Thus, Peter uses Christ's suffering as a paradigm for mistreated slaves:

1 Peter 2.18-23

18 Servants,<sup>12</sup> be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. 19 For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. 20 For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. 22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

Jesus' manner of suffering teaches his followers how to deal with injustice and affliction. Rather than responding in kind, we should entrust ourselves to God who judges justly. Not only this, but our *imitatio Christi* may even extend to laying down our own lives for our brothers and sisters (1 John 3.16; 4.10-11). In fact, Paul desired to share in Jesus' sufferings so that he may know him better (Phil 3.9).

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<sup>11</sup> 2 Cor 4.10-11; Eph 5.2; Phil 2.4-8; 3.10; 1 Pet 2.21-23; 4.13; Heb 12.1-2; 1 John 3.16; 4.10

<sup>12</sup> The word here is οἰκέται, which literally means "members of the household" (BDAG), but here, "household slaves." Oftentimes, Christianity spread among the slaves though their masters went on practicing traditional Greco-Roman idol worship.

## 6. Jesus Died to Justify Us Apart from the Law<sup>13</sup>

A great portion of Paul's epistles to the Romans and Galatians discusses the Jew's relation to the law and sin now that Christ has opened up a new way of relating to God through his work on the cross. Though we could not find justification through the works of the law, we can find it apart from the law through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 3.19-23). God's grace justifies us as a gift, not in accordance with obeying the law, but as a result of the favor obtained through Christ's blood (Rom 3.24-25). We are no longer wed to the law, but through Christ's death, we have died as well, freeing us from that old covenant so that we could marry another—him whom God raised from the dead (Rom 7.1-4). Since the one who does not abide by everything written in the law is under a curse, through his death, Christ became a curse on our behalf, as it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" (Gal 3.10-13; Deut 27.26; 21.23). Because of Christ's work, we can receive the promised spirit as well as the blessing of Abraham (Gal 3.14). Though the law was good and holy and functioned as our guardian until Christ came, now that faith has arrived, "we are no longer under a guardian" (Gal 3.23-26). Paul even goes so far as to say, "If righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose" (Gal 2.21). Inverting that last thought, we understand that the purpose of Christ's death (at least one of them) is to make us righteous apart from the law.

In addition, Hebrews makes much of Christ's death in relation to the law of Moses. We learn that God's son who brought us the new covenant is better than the angels who mediated the old covenant (Heb 1-2) since the son (Jesus) is better than the servant (Moses) (Heb 3) and his priesthood (after Melchizedek) is better than Aaron's (Heb 7). The new covenant Jesus ratified with his blood is better than the old law because it is founded on better promises (Heb 8), has a better sacrifice (Heb 10), and a better priestly service since Jesus serves in God's heavenly temple rather than the earthly copy (Heb 9). As a result of Christ's death, neither Gentiles nor Jews should seek justification through the works of the law, but instead on the basis of Christ's merits.

## 7. Jesus Died to Free Us from Sin to Live Righteously<sup>14</sup>

Though this purpose of Christ's death gets short shrift, the sheer volume of texts describing it should alert us to how important it is for a balanced understanding of atonement. The bumper sticker, "I'm not perfect, just forgiven" glibly excuses the driver from any number of transgressions on the misunderstanding that Christ garnered forgiveness for our past sins without setting us free from them in the present. This is like spraying a flower scent to cover a foul odor instead of turning on the fan to vent it outside. Does Christ merely accept us, as we are, or does he transform us from revolting miscreants into delightful saints?

Baptism wonderfully brings together both our death to our old ways as well as our resurrection to walk in the newness of life (Rom 6.1-6). We do not remain in the grave, still enslaved to the cruel master, Sin. Instead we emerge emancipated, ready to obey Righteousness. "How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom 6.2). Here is a bit more of the argument:

Romans 6.6-23

6 We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. 7 For one who has died has been set free from sin...11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. 12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions...17 But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, 18 and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness...22 But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thus, Christ's death not only covers sin, but kills it—or, rather, kills us so that we find freedom from the old slave master, becoming slaves, instead, of righteousness and of God. The fruit of this mindset is righteousness and eternal life. Although the law could not free us from sin, God found a way around it "by sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the

<sup>13</sup> Rom 3.21-22, 28; 7.3-6; 1 Cor 15.56-57; Gal 2.21; Eph 2.13-16; Col 2.11-17; 1 Pet 1.2; Heb 12.24; 13.20

<sup>14</sup> Rom 6.2-11; 8.3-4; 2 Cor 5.14-15; 1 Pet 1.18-19; 2.24; 4.1; Heb 2.18; 9.11-14; 10.10-15; 13.11-12; Rev 7.14

law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom 8.3-4). He does not just pay for sin on our behalf, but his death makes it possible for us to fulfill the law ourselves by walking according to the spirit. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Pet 2.24). This is like giving a beggar money to buy food. How would one feel if the man purchased alcohol instead? Christ dies to deal with sin, as we will see in our next section, but we dare not squander such a gift, returning to our old ways. For if we “go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.” (Heb 10.26-27).

While arguing that Christ’s sacrifice is better than the sacrifices given under the law, Hebrews makes a couple of profound points we do well to consider here. Jesus did not enter the imperfect earthly holy place, but he entered into heaven itself, not with animal blood, but with his own (Heb 9.12). While blood from goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer could purify the flesh, Christ’s blood is able to “purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb 9.13-14). While the priests go on offering the daily sacrifices, which can never take away sins, Christ offered a sacrifice once for all, which “perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (Heb 10.10-14).

### 8. Jesus Died for Our Sins<sup>15</sup>

This last category is the largest. Somehow Jesus’ death dealt with our sins or Sin in general. We find, perhaps the most primitive expression of this truth, in the creed Paul received and then passed on to the Corinthians: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor 15.3). This terse statement demonstrates, above all else, that the key for thinking about Jesus’ death for our sins lies in the Hebrew bible, a fact Jesus himself emphasized (cf. Luke 24.26-27, 44-46; cp. 1 Pet 1.10-11). Whether we should have in mind Isaiah 52-53, Leviticus 16, Psalm 22, Exodus 12, or some other text is unclear.<sup>16</sup> We know that already at the last supper, Jesus understood that his death brought about forgiveness for others:

Matthew 26.27-28

27 And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

In fact, we can trace this understanding back quite a bit earlier to when he said, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10.45).<sup>17</sup> Thus, Jesus interpreted his own death as an act he accomplished on behalf of others. Here is a list of texts that likewise teach this simple yet theologically deep point:

Is 53.4 “he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows”

Is 53.5 “he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed”

Is 53.6 “the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all”

Is 53.8 “he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people”

Is 53.10 “his soul makes an offering for guilt”

Is 53.11 “[he will] make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities”

Is 53.12 “he poured out his soul to death...yet he bore the sin of many”

Mark 10.45 “the Son of Man came...to give his life as a ransom for many”

John 11.50 “it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish”

John 11.51 “he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation”

Rom 4.25 “handed over to death for our trespasses”

Rom 5.6 “Christ died for the ungodly”

Rom 5.8 “Christ died for us”

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<sup>15</sup> Is 53; Mat 26.27-28 (cp. Luke 22.19); Rom 3.23-26; 4.25; 5; 14.15; 1 Cor 11.23-36; 15.3-4; 2 Cor 5.17-21; Eph 5.2; Col 2.13-14; 1 Tim 2.6; Heb 2.17; 7.27; 9.26-28; 1 Pet 2.24; 1 Jn 1.7-9; 2.2; 4.10

<sup>16</sup> The Gospel authors used the following texts: Ex 12.46 or Num 9.12 or Ps 34.20 in Jn 19.36; Zech 11.12-13 in Mat 27.9-10; Zech 12.10 in Jn 19.37; Zech 13.7 in Mat 26.31 and Mark 14.27; Ps 22.1 in Mat 27.46 and Mark 15.34; Ps 22.8 in Mat 27.43; Ps 22.18 in John 19.34; Ps 31.5 in Luke 23.46; Is 53.12 in Luke 22.37.

<sup>17</sup> Jesus had predicted his death numerous times in the Gospels, but did not explain why he had to die in these predictions, so I am leaving them out.

- Rom 14.15 “do not destroy the one for whom Christ died”  
 2 Cor 5.14 “one has died for all, therefore all have died”  
 2 Cor 5.21 “for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin”  
 Gal 1.4 “who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age”  
 Gal 3.13 “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us”  
 1 Pet 2.24 “he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree”  
 2 Pet 2.21 “Christ also suffered for you”  
 Heb 2.9 “by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone”  
 Heb 9.28 “so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many”

We will return to the question of substitution and the difference between the prepositions ἀντί (anti) and ὑπέρ (hyper) below when I describe Anselm’s theory of satisfaction, but for now, we can clearly see that Jesus’ death was not an accident, nor an act to benefit himself, but something he underwent for others. On the cross he bore our griefs, sorrows, iniquities, and sin. On our behalf he was pierced, crushed, chastised, wounded, cut off, stricken, handed over, cursed, made to suffer, and subjected to death. As time went on, the first generation of Christ’s followers employed a number of metaphors to picture Jesus’ death for sin, including sacrificing an animal, paying a ransom, and canceling a debt.

### *Sacrifice*

Although we find it difficult to get our heads around animal sacrifice today, it was ubiquitous in antiquity. Jews, Greeks, and Romans all considered animal sacrifice entirely appropriate and offered victims routinely. The Hebrew bible itself takes sacrificing animals for granted without ever laying out a theology of sacrifice. In Christ’s time, the temple in Jerusalem daily offered sacrifices to God according to the prescriptions in the book of Leviticus. Thus, it should not surprise us that the earliest Christians employed a sacrifice metaphor to describe Christ’s death for our sins. “Christ...gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5.2). When John the Baptist sees Jesus he cries out, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1.29; cp. 1 Pet 1.19). In one place Paul says, “For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.” In addition, the book of Hebrews portrays Jesus as not only the offering but also the offeror (Heb 7.27). After discussing the Day of Atonement when the high priest entered the holy of holies “but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people” (Heb 9.7), the author goes on to state that Christ’s high priestly service is better because “he entered once for all into the holy places [in heaven], not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Heb 9.11-12). Probably, the many texts that say Christ bore our sin likewise refers back to the Day of Atonement when they sent scapegoat away (Lev 16.21-22). Lastly, the sacrifice finds expression in the language of propitiation (Rom 3.24-26; 1 John 2.2; 4.10). The Bauer-Danker lexicon (BDAG) defines propitiation as “appeasement necessitated by sin, expiation” or “instrument for appeasing, sacrifice to atone, sin-offering.”<sup>18</sup> Without question, this is the language of sacrifice. We will consider “propitiation” further below under the penal substitution atonement theory.

### *Ransom*

As we’ve already seen, Jesus himself uses the term “ransom” in reference to giving his life (Mark 10.45). Although people often paid ransoms for the manumission of slaves, a concept we will return to shortly, a ransom is not limited to this arena. For example consider this commandment from the Torah:

Exodus 21.29-30

But if the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not kept it in, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death. If a ransom is imposed on him, then he shall give for the redemption of his life whatever is imposed on him.

<sup>18</sup> entry 3705 ἱλασμός, Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (BDAG), (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000). Likewise the Liddell-Scott-Jones Lexicon (LSJ) defines ὁ ἱλασμός as “means of appeasing” and “atonement, sin offering.” Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).

In this case, the ox owner should die, but God makes an allowance to relax the law if he agrees to pay a ransom—a fee that pays for his life, presumably set by the victim’s family. However, the NT is not very specific about the situation of the ransom, but instead focuses on the *result* of the paid ransom. Jesus gave himself “as a ransom for all” (1 Tim 2.6) in order to free us from our “futile ways” (1 Pet 1.18-19) or from “all lawlessness” (Tit 2.14). Other ransom texts talk about redeeming Israel (Luke 1.68; 24.21) or purchasing a people for God with his blood (Rev 5.9; 14.3). However, several texts specifically use ransom in the sense of freedom from slavery. While discussing slavery, a common institution in antiquity, Paul advises his fellow free Christians not to become slaves of men since they were “bought with a price” (1 Cor 7.23). In another place we read, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6.19-20). Those who fall into heresy are guilty of “even denying the master who bought them” (2 Peter 2.1). Thus, these ransom usages imply not freedom *en toto*, but a purchase—perhaps from the slave market—such that the slave has a new master, Jesus. Interestingly, in none of these cases does the bible specify to whom the ransom was paid or expound on the metaphor in any detail. We will return to the ransom theory of atonement in part two and develop this notion much further there.

### *Debt*

Lastly we find the metaphor of a cancelled debt. Though we were dead in our trespasses, God has made us alive together with him, “having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Col 2.13-14). We owed a debt we could not pay (cp. parables of Jesus in Mat 18.23-35 and Luke 7.41-43). Through the means of the cross, God has canceled the debt. We are now free.

To sum up, the bible outlines eight answers (at least) to the question, “Why did Jesus die?” He died to deal with our sins, free us to live righteously, justify us apart from the law, provide an example, defeat evil, express love, reconcile us to God, and provide eternal life. Whatever atonement theory one adopts it cannot contradict any of these biblical truths. Now we will turn to consider several atonement models Christians have put forward for thinking about how Christ’s death dealt with our sin in a more precise way.

## **Part Two: How Jesus Death Dealt with Our Sin**

Are we satisfied to leave matters where the biblical data lies or should we press on to, as James Orr put it, “seek the inmost secret of atonement?”<sup>19</sup> Alas, for centuries, Christians have meditated on Christ’s redemptive work in an effort to better understand what happened behind the scenes. In this part I will cover seven theories in roughly chronological order. Before we begin, I should note that these various ways of looking at atonement are not mutually exclusive. I will begin with the two theories that emphasize spiritual warfare.

### **1. Ransom Theory**

Satan once showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time and then said, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will” (Luke 4.6). On the basis of this text, some have concluded that when the first humans rebelled against God, they transferred the dominion and authority over this world to Satan. This is why Jesus called him, “the ruler of this world” (John 14.30), Paul said he was “the god of this age” (2 Cor 4.4), and John termed him “the deceiver of the whole world” (Rev 12.9). In Christ’s atoning work, he delivered humanity “from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son in whom we have redemption” (Col 1.13-14). In fact, when he ascended, “he led a host of captives” with him, liberating them from Satan’s custody. Augustine of Hippo (ad 354-430) writes:

For men were held captive under the devil, and served devils; but they were redeemed from captivity. They could sell, but they could not redeem themselves. The redeemer came, and gave a price; he poured forth his blood, and bought the whole world...The blood of Christ was the price. What is equal to this? What, but the whole world?<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> James Orr, “Atonement,” in *Hasting’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. James Hastings, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), p. 74.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms* 94.5, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, vol. 8, ed. Philip Schaff, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1892), p. 472.



Thus, through Christ's valuable sacrifice, God paid the devil the required ransom to release us from his custody. But, would Satan just release his captives merely because God offered to purchase them? He probably would refuse. Thus, the ransom theory often includes the element of deception. Somehow God would have to trick the devil into overreaching. The devil only had legal right over those who commit sin. However, when he murdered Jesus of Nazareth, he overstepped his authority. Augustine explains it this way:

But the redeemer came, and the seducer was overcome. And what did our redeemer do to him who held us captive? For our ransom he held out his cross as a trap; he placed in it as a bait his blood. He indeed had power to shed his blood, he did not attain to drink it. And in that he [Satan] shed the blood of him who was no debtor, he was commanded to render up the debtors.<sup>21</sup>

Through deception Satan enslaved humanity so also, through deception God freed humanity. This is God's secret and hidden wisdom that he planned from long ago. "None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor 2.8).

#### *Criticisms:*

The typical criticism leveled against this way of looking at Christ's death is that it gives too much authority to the devil—as if he is somehow God's equal. The idea that God is making deals with Satan for human lives and even employing trickery may appear "startling, if not revolting."<sup>22</sup> It's not clear precisely why humanity is under Satan's control or why God cannot just take us back. Furthermore, a warfare model may be more appropriate than a ransom paid to a kidnapper (we'll look at this next). Even so, the ransom theory enjoyed widespread popularity for the first millennium of Christian history. In eleventh century, Anselm of Canterbury (followed by Peter Abelard) pointed out that since Satan himself was a rogue, he could not equitably lay claim to humanity, therefore, God was under no obligation to pay him a ransom.

However, the ransom theory may still work if we take Satan out of the equation. To whom is the ransom paid? Perhaps it was paid to no one in particular, but it was the necessary satisfaction of God's justice. Satan does not have rights over us, he's just a squatter who though he's allowed to go on exercising authority, is not himself any more authorized than someone who moves into a foreclosed house. We'll return to the satisfaction theory, but for now, let's move to the spiritual warfare idea, called Christus Victor.

## **2. Christus Victor Theory**

The Christus Victor theory or "Christ the conqueror" sets the cross within a cosmic battle between Satan and God. It picks up on the spiritual warfare motif found throughout scripture. "In short," writes Gregory Boyd, "Jesus' main mission was to bring an end to the cosmic war that had been raging from time immemorial and to thus set Satan's captives free (Lk 4:18; Eph 4:8)...Everything Jesus accomplished...can be understood as aspects of his military campaign to vanquish the powers of evil."<sup>23</sup> Throughout his ministry, Jesus fought evil relentlessly. He entered into hand-to-hand combat with demons, casting them out left and right from the people he met. Like a mighty warrior, Christ advanced against Satan's realm and damaged his stranglehold over the people of the land. Peter summarized Jesus' ministry as "doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10:38). Thus, when we come to consider his passion, we can see his work on the cross, not as something new or different, but as a continuation and climax of everything he had done up to that moment.

Throughout the scenes of Christ's passion, we witness unmitigated hatred mixed with malicious brutality far beyond what makes sense from a natural perspective—behavior inexplicable on the basis of human psychology. The ruthless demonic forces pulling the strings were not content to kill Jesus, but exacerbated his slow agonizing demise with repeated mockery and diabolical torture. Why did Jesus have to endure such a nightmare? Satan's wild and uncontrolled rage against Christ blinded him from grasping God's redemptive plan (1 Cor 2.7). In the end, Jesus neither reviled the mockers nor threatened the torturers, but died trusting in God (1 Pet 2.23). Jesus did not

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *Sermon 80.2* (130.2 in some editions), in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, vol 6., p. 499.

<sup>22</sup> William Kent, "Doctrine of the Atonement," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), accessed April 4, 2016, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02055a.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> Gregory Boyd, "Atonement: What Is the Christus Victor View?" *Re|knew Blog*, June 2014, accessed April 11, 2016, <http://reknew.org/2014/06/atonement-what-is-the-christus-victor-view/>.

crack; he did not give in; he did not falter. With the torrent and flood of malice and cruelty aimed at him, like a sponge he absorbed it all. Steve Chalke puts it this way:

On the cross Jesus took on the ideology that violence is the ultimate solution by “turning the other cheek” and refusing to return evil for evil, willingly absorbing its impact within his own body...Just as a lightning-conductor soaks up powerful and destructive bolts of electricity, so Jesus, as he hung on that cross, soaked up all the forces of hate, rejection, pain and alienation all around him.<sup>24</sup>

What appeared to be a great defeat for God and His anointed one was in fact just the opposite—a great victory. Like a judo throw, God used Satan’s own momentum against him. Irenaeus (ad 130-202) explains:

For he fought and conquered; for he was man contending for the fathers,<sup>25</sup> and through obedience doing away with disobedience completely: for he bound the strong man, and set free the weak, and endowed his own handiwork with salvation, by destroying sin. For he is a most holy and merciful Lord and loves the human race...For unless man had overcome the enemy of man, the enemy would not have been legitimately vanquished.<sup>26</sup>

As a result of Christ’s crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, God seated him at His right hand “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (Eph 1.21). God put all things in subjection under Christ’s feet, including angels and authorities and powers, making him the victorious conqueror over all (Eph 1.22; 1 Pet 3.22).

#### *Criticisms:*

According to Thomas Schreiner, one of the problems of the Christus Victor model is that it “says very little about human sin and the need for forgiveness.”<sup>27</sup> It is as if Satan has power over us to nudge us towards sin, thus excusing us of our own personal responsibility. In addition it’s not clear exactly how the crucifixion actually defeats malevolent spiritual powers. In fact, the NT tends to associate Christ’s dislodging and reordering of cosmic powers with his ascension, viz. Eph 1.20-23; Col 1.16; Phil 2.9; 1 Pet 3.22. Furthermore, we have only a handful of texts that explicitly attach Christ’s death to defeating evil. Boyd, himself, laments the paucity of biblical data explaining this model:

Obviously, this account leaves unanswered a number of questions we might like answered. E.g., precisely how did Calvary and the resurrection defeat the powers? In my estimation, the ancient Christus Victor models of the atonement, like some other models, became incredulous [sic] precisely because they too vigorously pressed for details...we must humbly acknowledge that our understanding is severely limited.<sup>28</sup>

That Christ is the victor who conquers spiritual powers by waging spiritual warfare throughout his ministry and his death, resurrection, and ascension is without question. In fact, the Christus victor view is very similar to my biblical reason (4), “Jesus Died To Defeat Evil.” However, it lacks explanatory scope, describing merely one aspect of what Christ accomplished with his death without explaining how his death defeated or absorbed evil. We now move on from theories focused on Satan and instead consider how Christ’s cross subjectively affects his followers.

### **3. Moral Exemplar Theory**

Jesus’ death deals with the subjective rather than objective ramifications of sin. Rather than focusing on what happened with God or Satan, this view looks at how Christ’s death affects people. I have already explored the primary biblical texts supporting this position. Like many before and after him Augustine accepted that in Christ’s sufferings “our Lord has deigned to give us an example of patience, for our ultimate salvation and for practical use

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<sup>24</sup> Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 179.

<sup>25</sup> The Greek here is ἀντὶ τῶν πατέρων, which literally means “in the place of the fathers.”

<sup>26</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.18.6, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), pp. 447-8.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Schreiner, “Penal Substitution Response,” in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Beilby and Paul Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. 50.

<sup>28</sup> Gregory Boyd, “Christus Victor View”, in *The Nature of the Atonement*, p. 37 (fn 23).

in living this life.”<sup>29</sup> However, with Peter Abelard (ad 1079-1142) controversy broke out over the moral exemplar view, probably because he held it over against both the ransom and satisfaction theories. Abelard writes:

How very cruel and unjust it seems that someone should require the blood of an innocent person as a ransom, or that in any way it might please him that an innocent person be slain, still less that God should have so accepted the death of his Son that through it he was reconciled to the whole world...Nevertheless it seems to us that in this we are justified in the blood of Christ and reconciled to God, that it was through this matchless grace shown to us that his Son received our nature, and in that nature, teaching us both by word and by example, persevered to the death and bound us to himself even more through love, so that when we have been kindled by so great a benefit of divine grace, true charity might fear to endure nothing for his sake.<sup>30</sup>

Abelard further dismissed the ransom theory by urging “that Satan was clearly guilty of injustice in the matter and could have no right to anything but punishment.”<sup>31</sup> Christ died not to pay a debt or satisfy justice but as an expression of God’s love—“a moving demonstration of forgiving love, magnetizing and eliciting man’s love in response to God’s.”<sup>32</sup> Several centuries later, Faustus Socinus (ad 1539-1604) took Abelard’s position even further. George Williams explains:

Socinus maintained that God is always at liberty to punish or to forgive sins...Sin, Socinus argued, is analogous to an insult or a debt, which, like these, can be overlooked or forgiven without any further condition. Surely God forgives under the New Covenant no less freely than he once forgave under the Old Covenant, namely, without receiving *plenary* satisfaction.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, as Marian Hillar points out, “The true role of Jesus was to demonstrate to people how to be saved.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, Jesus died as the supreme example of obedience until the end in the face of heinous abuse.

### *Criticisms*

As with the ransom and Christus victor, this theory certainly contains truth we saw in my biblical reason (5), “Jesus Died to Provide an Example,” but it simply cannot bear the full weight of the atonement. It is not clear why Jesus had to die. His atonement collapses into martyrdom. As Grounds put it, “In the moral universe it is an epiphenomenon.”<sup>35</sup> Christ’s death doesn’t actually do anything in relationship to God, the devil, or justice but it finds its only purpose in inspiring us to follow his example. However, other great people inspire us like St. Patrick or Helen Keller, but they weren’t martyred. If God freely forgives sins without any payment, how is that just? It would be like a judge who decides to forgive a murderer rather than punishing her. Other criticisms include undermining the seriousness of sin, promoting salvation by works, and contradicting the scriptures that talk of Christ bearing sin (see the list of texts under reason (8), “Jesus Died for Sins,” above). In the end the moral exemplar view lacks scope to stand alone as a sufficient theory for the atonement. We now move on to consider theories related to justice.

## **4. Satisfaction Theory**

Anselm of Canterbury (ad 1033-1109) developed his satisfaction theory over against the ransom theory in his book *Why God Became Man*. He argued that every sin offends God’s honor because it deprives him of the obedience we owe him. Anselm explains, “Therefore the honor taken away must be repaid, or punishment must follow; otherwise, either God will not be just to himself, or he will be weak in respect to both parties; and this it is impious even to think of.”<sup>36</sup> However, we are unable to pay the debt of total obedience. Even if one repented and began living righteously, she would, by that act, not in any way succeed in paying the debt since continued obedience is

<sup>29</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon 218: Concerning the Passion of the Lord*, trans. Mary Muldowney, in *Saint Augustine: Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1959), p. 164.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Abelard, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Steven R. Cartwright in *The Fathers of the Church: Mediaeval Continuation* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), pp. 167-8.

<sup>31</sup> Kent, “Doctrine of the Atonement.”

<sup>32</sup> Grounds, “Atonement,” p. 72.

<sup>33</sup> George Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 1995), p. 987.

<sup>34</sup> Marian Hillar, “Laelius and Faustus Socini: Founders of Socinianism, Their Lives and Theology,” *The Journal from the Radical Reformation* (Spring 2002): 17.

<sup>35</sup> Grounds, “Atonement,” p. 73.

<sup>36</sup> Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* 1.13, trans. Sidney Deane (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1926), p. 207.

continually owed. We are as debtors who only earn enough to break even and so can never save enough no matter how long or hard we work to repay. Thus, humanity needs a savior: one who does not owe a debt (sinless) and who can pay our debt. Anselm argues that salvation “cannot be effected unless the aforesaid satisfaction be made, which none but God can make and none but man ought to make, it is necessary for the God-man to make it.”<sup>37</sup> Though he did not deserve death, owing to his sinless obedience, Christ willingly obeyed to the point of death, paying God back more than he owed. “No man except this one ever gave to God what he was not obliged to lose, or paid a debt he did not owe.”<sup>38</sup> Such a supererogatory life and death puts God in debt to pay Christ some reward. Jesus requests the cancellation of humankind’s debt as his reward. God pays what he owes, which restores equity in the universe. In this way, Christ’s life and death satisfies God’s injured honor, setting humanity free while preserving his justice.

As with his earlier ontological argument for God’s existence (in his *Monologion*), Anselm’s logic is tightly argued and convincing. His theory takes sin seriously, desperately seriously, and his solution explains why Jesus had to die. Satisfaction in no way conflicts with the other non-negotiables I covered in part one. It is easy to see why the satisfaction theory has dominated Catholic theology from the twelfth century right up to today. However, this theory is not without significant flaws as well.

### *Criticisms*

Perhaps the best way to begin is to call to mind the parable of the prodigal son. After he had squandered his inheritance, he returned home and confessed his sin to his father, requesting he merely hire him as a servant. Robin Collins offers the following satire:

But his father responded: "I cannot simply forgive you for what you have done, not even so much as to make you one of my hired men. You have insulted my honor by your wild living. Simply to forgive you would be to trivialize sin; it would be against the moral order of the entire universe...."

"But father, please..." the son began to plead.

"No," the father said, "either you must be punished or you must pay back, through hard labor for as long as you shall live, the honor you stole from me."

Then the elder brother spoke up. "Father, I will pay the debt that he owes..." And it came to pass that the elder brother took on the garb of a servant and labored hard year after year...and finally, when the elder brother died of exhaustion, the father’s wrath was placated against his younger son and they lived happily for the remainder of their days.<sup>39</sup>

Collins’ parody helpfully exposes two of the issues. The first of which calls into question whether the father could honestly said to have forgiven the boy. If he demands satisfaction, then doesn’t that preclude forgiveness, especially considering the fact that ἀφίημι (to forgive), literally means “cancel, remit, pardon” (BDAG)?<sup>40</sup> The Racovian Catechism puts it this way:

But to a free forgiveness nothing is more opposite than such a satisfaction as they contend for, and the payment of an equivalent price. For where a creditor is satisfied, either by the debtor himself, or by another person on the debtor’s behalf, it cannot with truth be said of him that he freely forgives the debt.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *ibidem* 2.6.

<sup>38</sup> *ibidem* 2.18b.

<sup>39</sup> Robin Collins, “Understanding Atonement: A New and Orthodox Theory,” last modified 1995, accessed April 13, 2016, <http://home.messiah.edu/~rcollins/Philosophical%20Theology/Atonement/AT7.HTM>.

<sup>40</sup> The astute defender of satisfaction could argue that God both receives payment as well as forgives. If a friend pays me back \$100 that he stole from me, we would be even, but I would still need to forgive the violation of friendship. Thus, it is possible to require payment and still express forgiveness, at least when one desires full reconciliation.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Wissowatius et al., *The Racovian Catechism*, trans. Thomas Rees (London: Paternoster Row, 1818, first published 1609) p. 305.

A second criticism is the “justice worry”: that substituting in the elder brother to make satisfaction actually doubles the injustice rather than nullifying it. Now, the one who owed the debt goes free without having to pay it, and the one who did not owe it suffers hard labor. Such “justice” would never work in a court of law beyond the realm of fines. For example, if a murderer’s mother volunteered to pay for his crime, what judge would accept such a substitution?

Another criticism relates to the manner in which Christ not only died, but suffered. Michael Murray and Michael Rea explain:

For purposes of meriting a reward or for serving as an exemplar, why would it not suffice for Christ to dwell among us, live a perfect human life resisting all earthly temptation, and then die a quiet death at home? Indeed, these theories seem unable to account even for the value in Christ’s passion, much less its necessity.<sup>42</sup>

Lastly, satisfaction approaches atonement from the limited perspective of medieval feudal justice. Thus, Christ’s death reduces to a transaction rather than a bloody, heart-rending act of God’s love. However, God never demanded equity when he instituted the sacrificial system in Leviticus. He willingly accepted animal and grain offerings. We could even say that the precedent of the Hebrew system was for God to require only partial payment. For example, on the Day of Atonement, God had them do the following:

Leviticus 16.21-22

21 And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. 22 The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.

Does God only require one measly goat to atone for the sins of the entire nation? Moreover, he doesn’t even have them kill the scapegoat; they merely lead it away to the wilderness. In the end, what makes a sacrifice efficacious is that God accepts it, not that it has equal value. Thus, even Thomas Aquinas thought Christ’s death was “the most suitable mode of redemption, not a mode intrinsically necessary.”<sup>43</sup> Before I move on to address the most popular atonement theory in Protestant churches, we should take an excursus to evaluate the effect that the doctrine of Christ’s deity has on atonement.

### **Excursus: How Belief in the Deity of Christ Affects the Doctrine of Atonement**

Here we will ponder two advantages to believing Jesus is God vis-à-vis atonement followed by three disadvantages. Naturally, Anselm made much of Christ’s deity in his *Why God Became Man*, arguing that he must be God in order to provide full satisfaction. I’ve heard this expressed many times in our own day, and I believe it lies behind the fear many have in considering any alternative to the Trinity: “How can Jesus pay for our sins if he is not God?” In this question we encounter the reasoning of a medieval Catholic monk, not a modern Protestant believer. Although I’ve already hinted at how God’s established pattern in the Day of Atonement was to accept sacrifices that have a lesser value on behalf of the greater, we will delay discussing this issue further until we arrive at the governmental theory below. Suffice it to say, Christ’s deity gives the satisfaction and penal substitution views an apparent equity to the atonement transaction.

A second advantage to believing in Christ’s deity with respect to the atonement, is that God does for us what we could not do for ourselves. Here is a typical way of stating this advantage:

We take it that what Paul’s statement that God purposed Christ as a propitiatory victim means is that God, because in his mercy he willed to forgive sinful men and, being truly merciful, willed to forgive them

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Murray and Michael Rea, “Philosophy and Christian Theology,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2002, revised 2012), accessed April 13, 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/christiantheology-philosophy/#Ato>.

<sup>43</sup> Grounds, “Atonement,” p. 73.

righteously, that is, without in any way condoning their sin, purposed to direct against his own very self in the person of his son the full weight of that righteous wrath which they deserved.<sup>44</sup>

This way of approaching atonement avoids the justice worry to some extent since the judge decides to take the punishment himself. Even if it is not biblical or coherent, I cannot help but admire the beauty and affective draw of a God who willing gives up everything to come and save his helpless creation. Even so, we dare not accept an account purely on how inspiring we find it.

Having briefly considered two main advantages to believing Christ's deity, we now turn to examine three disadvantages. Firstly, Christ's deity can result in absurdities. For example, Gregory of Nyssa teaches in his catechism, "that the ransom in our behalf might be easily accepted by him who required it, the deity was hidden under the veil of our nature, that so, as with ravenous fish, the hook of the deity might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh."<sup>45</sup> Would such a ruse actually fool Satan? Recall that the demons regularly recognized Jesus for who he was when he encountered them (Mat 8.29; etc.). Along similar lines, the satisfaction and penal theories break down when we consider them from a trinitarian perspective. Collins insightfully explains the absurdity from the perspective of one-self and three-self views of the Trinity:

To see the problem clearly, first note that if we consider God the Son as one with God the Father, the Atonement under the Satisfaction view simply amounts to God paying God, which is equivalent to God forgiving the debt. On the other hand, if we consider God the Son as distinct from God the Father, the question arises: Who pays the debt we owe to God the Son because of our sin against him? If Christ--that is, God the Son--pays it, that is equivalent to God the Son paying himself and hence forgiving it. But if God the Son can forgive the debt we owe him, why can't the Father do the same? So either way you look at it, it turns out that God the Father can simply forgive our debt without demanding repayment, contrary to the central claim of the Satisfaction theory.<sup>46</sup>

To put it more crassly, God beats himself up to satisfy his wrath against everyone else. Surely, this can't be right.

Secondly, a classic incarnational view devalues the cross, focusing the weight of emphasis on Christ's birth not on his death for our sins. For example, in Collins' incarnational theory of atonement, he emphasizes God the Son's sharing of our "life-situation," including the experience of "alienation,"<sup>47</sup> vulnerability, suffering, victimization, mortality and the like<sup>48</sup> rather than Christ's death itself as dealing with sin. This is particularly worrisome in light of how many texts (cited above in part one) the NT authors devote to describing and reveling in what Christ's death accomplished. Additionally, the classic dual natures doctrine (hypostatic union) teaches that God the Son unites with impersonal human nature. Thus, in his death, only impersonal human nature dies while his divine nature lives on unhindered. Of course, this is far less valuable than the death of a real human being.

Lastly, believing in the deity of Christ results in a significant contradiction. If the Christ is true God then he cannot die (owing to texts like 1 Tim 1.17 and 6.16 that plainly state God is immortal), and yet, the scripture repeatedly and unambiguously claims that he died for our sins (1 Cor 15.3; etc.). Typically, theologians will massage the language so that Christ "experiences" a human death rather than actually dying or they redefine death as the separation of the soul from the body. However, none of this chicanery will suffice. To experience death is to die; to die is to cease living. But, even if death were merely shucking off his human shell, this is precisely what Christ cannot do if he is immortal. After all, "immortal" means "not mortal" or "not able to die." Next we will consider penal substitution, the reigning paradigm among Protestants since the Reformation.

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<sup>44</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), p. 217.

<sup>45</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism* 24, trans. William More and Henry Wilson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1892), p. 492.

<sup>46</sup> Collins, "Understanding Atonement."

<sup>47</sup> Collins points to Christ's exclamation, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 16.34) as evidence for the Son's experience of alienation. Here Collins appears to eat his cake and have it too, since God the Son's omniscience necessarily prohibits his ignorance of why the Father forsook him.

<sup>48</sup> Collins, "Understanding Atonement."

## 5. Penal Substitution<sup>49</sup>

Human sin offends God, provoking his righteous indignation. As the moral arbiter of the cosmos he must ensure justice prevails ultimately. Since “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6.23), God could justifiably execute every sinner. However, instead he exercises forbearance, “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet 3.9). However, eventually the hammer must fall, dealing out rightful retribution. Martin Luther (ad 1483-1546) writes, “God cannot be a friend of sin nor gracious to it, nor can he remit the punishment and wrath, unless payment and satisfaction be made.”<sup>50</sup> Though this sounds similar to satisfaction theory, the metaphor is not so much a debtor in need of someone to pay her fine, but of a guilty criminal in a courtroom. John Calvin (1509-1564) explains:

Christ interposed, took the punishment upon himself and bore what by the just judgment of God was impending over sinners; with his own blood expiated the sins which rendered them hateful to God, by this expiation satisfied and duly propitiated God the Father, by this intercession appeased his anger, on this basis founded peace between God and men.<sup>51</sup>

Christ stands in as our substitute, taking the penalty we deserve. R.C. Sproul writes, “In the act of propitiation, God’s righteous wrath is appeased, and his justice is satisfied. The moral obligation that we owe for our sins is paid to God, who is thereby placated.”<sup>52</sup> In order to explore this view a little more deeply, I want to consider two aspects: propitiation and substitution.

### *Propitiation*

Linguists debate what ἱλάσκομαι (hilaskomai), the word traditionally translated “propitiate,” means. Some translations gloss it as “to make propitiation” (NASB, HCSB, ESV, NKJV), other as “to make atonement” (NET, NIV), still others as “to expiate” (NAB, RSV, NJB, NRSV<sup>53</sup>). To atone is to make “at one” two parties who are at enmity. To expiate is to express regret by making amends. To propitiate is to appease the wrath of an offended party. Whereas expiation focuses on the penitence of the offender, propitiation concentrates on the conciliation of the offended party. Hugo Grotius (ad 1583-1645) points out that “ἱλάσκειν [hilaskein] among all Greek writers, poets, historians, and others, is *to propitiate*, and is ordinarily construed with the accusative designating the person whose wrath is turned away.”<sup>54</sup> However, in the texts in question ἱλάσκειν (ilaskein) does not employ the accusative in reference to God. Here are the relevant passages:

Rom 3.25	God put forward Christ as a propitiation
Heb 2.17	in God's service Jesus made propitiation
1 John 2.2	Jesus is the propitiation for our sins
1 John 4.10	God loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins

Propitiation appears to work in the wrong direction in these texts. Rather than Jesus propitiating God, God propitiates Jesus or more accurately, rather than using Jesus as a way to propitiate God, God uses Jesus as a way to propitiate our sins. Some commentators also make the point that translators render ἱλαστήριον (place of propitiation) as “mercy seat” in Hebrews 9.5 but not in Romans 3.25.<sup>55</sup> C. H. Dodd (ad 1884-1973) argued that

<sup>49</sup> For a thorough modern defense of penal substitution see Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007).

<sup>50</sup> Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther* vol. 2, trans. John Nicholas Lenker, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), p. 344.

<sup>51</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.16, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), p. 435.

<sup>52</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Everyone's a Theologian*, (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2014), p. 163.

<sup>53</sup> Actually the NRSV says, “To make a sacrifice of atonement,” but this is the meaning of expiate.

<sup>54</sup> Hugo Grotius, *A Defense of the Catholic Faith concerning the Satisfaction of Christ, against Faustus Socinus*, trans. Frank Hugh Foster (Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1889), p. 145.

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion of Romans 3.24-26 from a non-wrath perspective, see Noah Worcester, *The Atoning Sacrifice, A Display of Love—Not Wrath* (Cambridge: Hilliard and Brown, 1830; reprint Dale Tuggy, 2013), pp. 56-75.

though ἰλάσκομαι (hilaskomai) meant to turn away wrath in pagan Greek literature, but in Jewish and Christian texts it meant to expiate. However Leon Morris and Roger Nicole disproved this hypothesis, citing many Jewish usages of ἰλάσκομαι (hilaskomai) both from the Septuagint and extrabiblical sources where it means to turn away wrath.<sup>56</sup> Even so, ἰλάσκομαι (hilaskomai) does not always mean placating an angry deity. The real question is whether appeasement makes sense for Romans 3.25. N. T. Wright makes the case it does:

The lexical history of the word *hilasterion* [ἱλαστήριον] is sufficiently flexible to admit of particular nuances in different contexts. Paul's context here [in Romans 3] demands that the word not only retain its sacrificial overtones (the place and means of atonement), but that it carry the note of propitiation of divine wrath—with, of course, the corollary that sins are expiated.<sup>57</sup>

I do not intend to settle the debate here, just to present the contours of the discussion. We must now shift our attention to substitution.

### *Substitution*

Before moving on to offer some criticism for penal substitution, I need to present the case for substitution. Jesus said, “the Son of Man came...to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10.45). L. L. Morris points out that “‘ransom’ has a substitutionary connotation, and *anti*, ‘for,’ is the preposition of substitution” thus, he continues, “the general thought of the passage (men should die, Christ dies instead, men no longer die) points to substitution.”<sup>58</sup> Morris also points out that in 1 Tim 2.6, “who gave himself as a ransom for all,” the word ransom ἀντίλυτρον (antilytron) “is a strong compound meaning ‘substitute-ransom.’”<sup>59</sup> Grotius adds Caiaphas’ prediction of “the inevitable ruin of the Jews if Christ should be permitted to live” (John 11.50). He continues:

If Christ should be killed that certain security would be obtained on account of it. Therefore he really wished to substitute the death of Christ for the ruin otherwise impending....This is the same as to say that he wished that Christ should perish in the place of the people, who otherwise—that is, under the contrary condition—would perish.”<sup>60</sup>

Lastly, Isaiah 53 strongly implies substitution in the following texts:

Isaiah 53.4-6, 11-12

4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned-- every one-- to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all....11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. 12 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

The servant stands in for the transgressors; he takes punishment in the place of those who deserve it (cp. Gal 3.13)

### *Criticisms*

As with the satisfaction theory, the justice worry is the primary criticism of penal substitution. As I mentioned before, it seems radically unjust for an innocent person to suffer on behalf of someone who is guilty.<sup>61</sup> Secondly,

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<sup>56</sup> Here are three examples from the LXX: Moses’ prayer turns God’s wrath away by (Ex 32.14), Aaron burns incense to turn God from his wrath (Num 16.46), and God’s wrath fell on Jerusalem and was not propitiated (Lam 3.42-43).

<sup>57</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections*, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), p. 476.

<sup>58</sup> L. L. Morris, *The New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1982), p. 105. Grotius had already seen this in the 17th century: “Socinus rejects this interpretation on account of the ambiguity of the word *for*, which frequently has the meaning *to the advantage of*. This is true of the Latin *pro*, as well as the Greek ὑπέρ. But the word ἀντί clearly excludes that meaning, and requires a commutation.” Grotius, *A Defense*, p. 181.

<sup>59</sup> Morris, *The New Bible Dictionary*, p. 106.

<sup>60</sup> Grotius, *A Defense*, pp. 185-6.

<sup>61</sup> John Dominic Crossan argues that “Substitutionary atonement is bad as theoretical Christian theology just as suicidal terrorism is bad as practical Islamic theology. Jesus died *because* of our sins, or *from* our sins, but that should never be misread as *for* our sins.” *God and Empire* (NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007), p. 140.



penal substitution sets the Father against the Son. Mark Stibbe argues that if Christ appeases God's wrath, "then Jesus ends up saving us from the Father as much as from sin."<sup>62</sup> "It would follow," explains the Racovian Catechism, "that we were more obliged to Christ than to God, and owed him more, indeed owed him everything; since he, by this satisfaction, showed us much kindness; whereas God, by exacting his debt, showed us no kindness at all."<sup>63</sup> However, this flies in the face the many texts wherein Jesus states he does nothing on his own initiative, but always what the Father wants (John 4.34; 5.19, 30; etc.).

Another criticism is that Christ did not truly suffer the penalty for sin. If the ultimate expression of God's wrath is eternal conscious torment, then Christ patently did not suffer it; if it is eternal death, then God should not have raised him from the dead on the third day. Fourthly, although Schreiner points out that "God's anger is not capricious or whimsical or arbitrary," but it "flows from his holiness...from his goodness, his matchless character,"<sup>64</sup> it is hard to imagine how such wrath fits into the Gospels' portrayals of Jesus' crucifixion. I struggle to understand how seeing his beloved Son, bloodied and battered, suffering in agony hour after hour, the Father would have righteous anger in his heart rather than heart-broken love and compassion. (A possible solution could be that Christ propitiates God's wrath at humanity while not experiencing it personally.)

Finally, penal substitution looks suspiciously like a pagan human sacrifice offered to appease the angry gods. Furthermore, if Christ pays the penalty for all sins then, are we not "absolutely freed from all liability to punishment, and therefore no further condition can by right be exacted from us to deliver us from the penalties of sin."<sup>65</sup> Chalke rather infamously made the following criticism:

The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement 'God is love'. If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.<sup>66</sup>

Of course defenders of penal substitution have answers for these criticisms, but I do not have space here to engage further.<sup>67</sup> I must move on to look at fascinating though little known model of atonement, called the governmental theory.

## 6. Governmental Theory

In 1617 Hugo Grotius wrote *A Defense of the Catholic Faith concerning the Satisfaction of Christ, against Faustus Socinus* because the latter taught God could forgive sin without requiring satisfaction. Although Grotius did not intend to innovate, but defend the traditional understanding, his unique approach to the atonement due to his professional interest in international relations led to what eventually became the known as the governmental theory of atonement.<sup>68</sup> Rather than regarding God as an offended party requiring propitiation or as a creditor to whom our debt is due, Grotius looked at God as the governor of the world who acts on behalf of the common good. God reacts against sin, as Sam Storms puts it, "not in terms of retributive justice which arises from God's character, but in terms of rectoral justice as related to the interests of public law and order, by whose maintenance alone the general good can be conserved."<sup>69</sup> Grotius argues that "all positive laws are absolutely relaxable" since "the law is not something internal within God, or the will of God itself, but only an effect of that will."<sup>70</sup> Thus, God can choose to accept a partial payment. Here is how Grotius unpacks this idea:

<sup>62</sup> Mark Stibbe, *My Father's Tears: The Cross and the Father's Love* (London: SPCK, 2014), p. 34.

<sup>63</sup> Wissowatius, *The Racovian Catechism*, p. 306.

<sup>64</sup> Schreiner, "Penal Substitution View," in *The Nature of the Atonement*, p. 80.

<sup>65</sup> Wissowatius, *The Racovian Catechism*, p. 306.

<sup>66</sup> Chalke and Mann, *The Lost Message*, pp. 182-3.

<sup>67</sup> For a thorough refutation of more than two dozen criticisms see Jeffery et. al., *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, pp. 208-328.

<sup>68</sup> Adherents to this view include Charles Finney, William Booth, Jonathan Edwards Jr., as well as many Methodists in the 19th century.

<sup>69</sup> Sam Storms, "Grotius and the Governmental Theory of the Atonement," *Enjoying God Blog*, March 17, 2009, accessed April 6, 2016, <http://www.samstorms.com/all-articles/post/grotius-and-the-governmental-theory-of-the-atonement>.

<sup>70</sup> Grotius, *A Defense*, p. 75.

God has, therefore, most weighty reasons for punishing, especially if we are permitted to estimate the magnitude and multitude of sins. But because among all his attributes love of the human race is pre-eminent, God was willing, though he could have justly punished the sins of all men with deserved and legitimate punishment, that is, with eternal death, and had reasons for so doing, to spare those who believe in Christ. But since we must be spared either by setting forth, or not setting forth, some example against so many great sins, in his most perfect wisdom he chose that way by which he could manifest more of his attributes at once, viz. both clemency and severity, or his hate of sin and care for the preservation of his law.<sup>71</sup>

As the victim of offenses God has good reason to require punishment. As the governor of the moral universe he has good reason to relax punishment. In fact, he does both. He requires a punishment less than the amount he is owed while sufficiently demonstrating how serious sin is and simultaneously setting an example to both deter sin and inspire righteousness. Thus, the cross was, from the perspective of a moral governor, the best overall solution to deal with sin.

The advantage of this view is that God actively solves the problem of humanity's separation from him. He is neither beholden to some external justice principle that binds him to a course of action nor is he a vengeful deity demanding a blood sacrifice to appease his rage. Christ bears our sins; he is pierced for our transgressions. He suffers the highest penalty one can pay—the death penalty—and in so doing expiates for the whole human race. God can retain his holy justice while expressing his loving mercy with an eye to how Christ's cross will maximally aid humans thereafter to choose him and his gracious offer of salvation.

#### *Criticisms*

As with the other two substitution theories the governmental view faces the justice worry. How is it fair that one man receives the punishment due to others while they go free? We will return to this objection, and hopefully solve it, in the next section. In addition, Wayne Grudem rejects the governmental theory for (1) failing to adequately account for Christ dying specifically for our sins, (2) taking away the objective character of the atonement, (3) introducing doubt that full forgiveness is available since Christ does not make full payment for sin, (4) implying God forgave us in his mind apart from Christ's death on the cross, and (5) inferring that God is mutable, which assaults God's "absolute character of justice."<sup>72</sup> I will not take space here to interact with Grudem's objections, other than to say that they appear to result more from misunderstandings than biblical or logical grounds. Now, at last we consider the view that can help us escape the nagging justice worry.

### **7. Communal Substitution Theory**

Joshua Thurow proposed this theory in the *Journal of Analytic Theology* (May 2015) and I encountered it in Dale Tuggy's fine Trinties podcast, episode 92 (June 2015). Thurow looks at the atonement from the perspective of collective sin. For example, when a company misbehaves, a certain subgroup of that company has committed individual wrongs that contributed to the corporate transgression. The government or community does not hold each person responsible for their individual wrongs; instead they demand that the corporation make it right, perhaps by apologizing, committing to change, making restitution, and suffering some penalty.<sup>73</sup> The company then has to figure out how to deal with the situation internally. It can require each responsible person pay a portion of the fine or it can pay it out of the company's profits. However, each individual that was involved should also make amends. For example, the individuals responsible could publicly apologize and receive demotions. They haven't paid what the company owed, but they did something to show that they are sorry for what they have done and agree with what the company did to propitiate the community. In contrast, someone could refuse to accept the company's solution and instead work the rest of his life to make amends. Furthermore, someone could refuse to accept what the company requires, preferring termination to reparation. Communal substitution depends on the idea that we can clearly distinguish between corporate and individual sin. Thurow's second example is helpful:

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<sup>71</sup> *ibidem*, p. 107.

<sup>72</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 582-3.

<sup>73</sup> According to Richard Swinburne, "Atonement involves four components—repentance, apology, reparation, and...penance (though not all of these are always required)." *Responsibility in Atonement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989; reprint, 1998), p. 81.

First, consider an example of individual wrongdoing: a basketball player intentionally punches another player during a game. The league rightly fines the offending player. It seems wrong for someone other than the offending player (e.g. a teammate, his fans, his mother) to pay this fine. Fines for violent offenses ought to be paid [sic] by the offender himself. Next, consider a case involving the same kind of wrongdoing, instead at the collective level: a basketball team gets into a fight with another team during a game. The commissioner decides to punish the offending team—not simply each individual fighting player—with a fine. Now, there are lots of morally acceptable ways for the team to pay the fine. The players could each contribute some money. One player (even if he didn't himself throw any punches) could decide to foot it for the team. The coach could decide to foot it for the team (again, even if he didn't throw any punches).

Thus, the communal substitution approach focuses not on individual wrongs but the group wrong. As a result of the way groups work, some subset of the group may make amends on behalf of the entire group. Thurow provides another example of a company that polluted a river to illustrate how a single representative might stand in for the group:

Suppose some underlings carried out the pollution plan and did their best to hide it from the president, who was thus non-culpably ignorant that the company was violating its duties. The president may thus “accept responsibility” even though he isn't himself morally responsible for contributing to the company's violation. He can do this because he is crucially *causally* responsible, even if not morally responsible, for the violation.<sup>74</sup>

So, Jesus, himself a human, offers to atone for the whole group of humanity. He offers satisfaction and/or suffers the penalty on behalf of everyone as the second Adam or representative human being. God appoints him as messiah—the anointed leader of the world—and accepts what Jesus offers on behalf of the group. Once he makes atonement for humanity, any individual offender may participate in this new reconciliation to God if he or she admits wrongdoing (confession) and commits to change his or her ways (repentance). Thus, the group of humankind ends up with two subsets: (1) those who appropriate what Jesus did on behalf of the group and (2) those who do not. God authorizes the messiah to judge this latter group on the last day.

Communal substitution has several significant advantages. First of all, it is compatible with both penal and satisfaction views, a point Thurow maintains throughout his treatment, as well as the governmental theory. Secondly, it solves the justice worry. No longer do we complain that someone unjustly suffers on behalf of an innocent person, since Christ himself is not only a member of the group but the quintessential member, the CEO, as it were, and he can take responsibility for the wrongdoing.<sup>75</sup> A third advantage is that this theory approaches humanity's problem from a group perspective, which the bible does constantly. For example, the scripture overwhelmingly speaks of Christ dying for *our* sins, not my sins. (See the texts listed above in part one, biblical reason (8).)<sup>76</sup> Finally, communal substitution enables participation. Christ does not die instead of people such that we have no moral obligations. He dies on behalf of the group, but the individual needs to participate in that atonement and so-to-speak die with him (cf. Col 2.20; 3.3; Rom 6.5, 8).

#### *Criticisms:*

Thurow raises three objections to his own view (and then offers replies to each). The first is that no human community exists since there is no organized structure to hold such a group together. This may be so, though from God's perspective, he certainly may see humanity as a group (cf. Rom 5.12-21). However, Thurow suggests that it

<sup>74</sup> Joshua Thurow, “Communal Substitutionary Atonement,” *Journal of Analytic Theology*, vol 3. (May 2015): p. 52.

<sup>75</sup> Thurow argues that Jesus can only ably represent humanity if he is also somehow causally responsible (i.e. he created humanity). However, what makes Jesus the representative is God's appointment. Jesus still has to choose whether or not he will act on behalf of the group or just save his own skin.

<sup>76</sup> N. T. Wright says, “[T]he most natural meaning of the phrase ‘the forgiveness of sins’ to a first-century Jew is not in the first instance the remission of *individual* sins, but the putting away of the whole nation's sins” (emphasis, his). *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 273. The only exception to corporate forgiveness, I can find is where Paul says, “Christ...loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2.20). Here Paul appropriates what Jesus did for the group to himself personally. We find something similar in the annual Seder, memorializing Passover, when the father of the house says, “It is because of what the LORD did for *me* when I came out of Egypt” even though most Jews throughout history never lived in Egypt (Ex 13.8).

could be that Jesus atones only for Israel. He is, after all, the Jewish messiah. Gentiles get grafted into this community through conversion (cf. Rom 11.17-25). Secondly, some might complain that God is not really forgiving sin if he requires satisfaction or punishment. However, the communal substitution enables us to have both, since Christ offers satisfaction or suffers punishment on behalf of the group, yet individuals do not participate in this reconciliation to God until they repent and receive individual forgiveness. Thirdly, God appears to endorse violence in general as well as the abuse of the innocent by accepting Jesus' passion as a means of atonement. Jesus is neither a child nor a bystander; he volunteers as God's anointed representative. Additionally, God does employ violence throughout the bible in both the Old and New Testaments so accepting this act of violence would not contradict his way of governing whatsoever. To these three Socinus adds another, arguing that Christ cannot be our representative on the basis that he was not made head of the church until his ascension.<sup>77</sup> However, God designates him the messiah, and thus, the representative, from the annunciation (Luke 1.32-33) and confirmed it at his baptism by anointing him with the spirit (Luke 3.22). One can hardly doubt that Jesus had taken that role after the triumphal entry (Luke 19.38), though his titulus offers the clearest evidence, publicly proclaiming his messianic claim in three languages (Luke 23.38).

Thurow argues that Jesus must be humanity's creator on the basis that as genuine representative he has to be causally responsible for humanity's error. Thus, if Christ creates humanity with the potential to go wrong, then he can accept responsibility for them actually going wrong. However, this also pushes in the other way. For example, when the government cracks down on a company for misbehaving, it would surely present a conflict of interest if the governor leading the charge was also the CEO of the company. If Jesus is God then, he is both the generator of humanity as well as the offended governor who holds humanity accountable. Someone does not need to be causally responsible for a situation to take responsibility for it; they just need to be in the position of responsibility. If that person is a duly appointed representative of the group, he must take responsibility for what they've done in the past as well as the present.

#### **Conclusion:**

In part one I laid out the biblical non-negotiables: Jesus died for our sins, to free us to live righteously, to justify us apart from the law, to provide us an example, to defeat evil, to express love, to reconcile us to God, and to provide eternal life. Next, I outlined seven major atonement theories, including, ransom, Christus victor, moral exemplar, satisfaction, penal substitution, governmental, and communal substitution. I have tried to present the strengths and weaknesses of each so that the reader may see how each functions. I would like to now combine several together to show how everything might fit together.

I begin with communal substitution. As I wrote earlier, this is not really its own theory, but an alteration or upgrade to either satisfaction or penal substitution. The latter of these insists that Christ took the punishment for sin upon himself in our place. In light of Isaiah 53, I find it difficult to deny such is the case. However, I'm not at all convinced that God poured out his wrath on his beloved Son while he hung on the cross, blood and sweat dripping from his brow. After all, the penalty for sin is death not wrath (Rom 6.23). Christ propitiates God's wrath against the group by taking upon himself the death penalty as humanity's God-appointed representative.

Additionally, as a biblical unitarian, I cannot accept the trinitarian concept of God dying for us. This frees me from dealing with the devastating disadvantages I outlined in the excursus: intratrinitarian logical absurdities, devaluing the cross, and contradicting immortality. However, I still have to deal with the question of how a "mere man" can pay for the sins of the world. I believe the communal view makes great strides in that direction, but in the end we cannot say that the penalty he suffered on behalf of the group actually equates to the sheer amount of communal offenses.

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<sup>77</sup> "Furthermore, Socinus continues, the orthodox doctrine, which stresses Christ's redemptive death, cannot support itself by the assertion that Christ as Head of the Church was qualified to take punishment upon himself in place of his members; for precisely that relationship first came into existence by virtue of his resurrection and psychopompic Ascension. Before this Ascension Christ did not stand in any special relationship to other human beings; and his death, therefore, did not deliver his disciples from the necessity of undergoing death." Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, p. 988.

Mankind is excessively wicked and has been so since the beginning. We wage war, murder, rape, torture, deceive, manipulate, abuse, discriminate, and pollute, just to name a few examples of chronic human misbehavior. We constantly dishonor and disregard what God says is right. Consequently, I take refuge in the primary insight of the governmental theory: that God exacts payment while simultaneously relaxing it. In the end, God is the moral governor of the cosmos, so he conceives of a way to deal with the separation brought on by sin while showing mercy and justice as well as displaying the exceeding horror of sin and providing an example to inspire those who would come later. Thus, he not only deals with sin, but he does so in a way that maximally reduces future sin. So, pulling it all together, we have a “governmental communal penal substitution theory.” Alas, such a title is not likely to catch on.

According to Orr, for an atonement theory to be adequate it must have “the aspect of propitiation, of expiation, of *restitutio in integrum*, as well as of moral influence.”<sup>78</sup> We may add that the theory coheres with as many biblical nonnegotiables as possible without contradicting any. Furthermore, the theory should explain why Christ had to die, make logical sense, and fit in with the biblical/Hebrew ethos. I believe the position I have staked out does all of this. Even so, I do not intend what I have written here to be the final word on this subject, quite the opposite. I hope what I have surveyed and proposed will help others, especially biblical unitarians, to understand the major options and develop their own biblically informed and logically cohesive views on atonement.

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<sup>78</sup> Orr, “Atonement”, p. 74.