A History of the Doctrine of the Atonement

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The church has historically explained the atonement—"the work Christ did in his life and death to earn our salvation"—in various ways.[1] At times, it has viewed the death of Christ as a payment to Satan; at other times, Christ's death has been considered a tribute offered to God to restore his honor lost through humanity's sin. Some in the church have focused on the great example of Christ's life as his chief accomplishment; others have underscored how much the death of Christ demonstrates the love of God and prompts humanity to love in return. The number of different views is quite extensive.

Unlike many important doctrines, the atonement has never been the subject of an ecumenical, or general, church council. Thus, whereas the Trinity, the deity of the Son of God, and the incarnation of Jesus Christ have definitive statements that have stood the test of time and are embraced by all Christians, no similar doctrinal formula on the death of Christ exists. The prevalent view among Protestants in general and evangelicals in particular is called the penal substitutionary view: "Christ's death was 'penal' in that he bore a penalty when he died. His death was also a 'substitution' in that he was a substitute for us when he died."[2] It will be the purpose of this article to outline briefly the development of the doctrine of the atonement with particular attention given to the various theories or models of the atonement formulated by the church throughout its history.

The Atonement in the Early Church

The early church offered various descriptions of Christ's sacrificial work. At first, these were quite simple explanations. For example, Clement of Rome described Christ's work of substitution: "Because of the love he had for us, Jesus Christ our Lord, in accordance with God's will, gave his blood for us, and his flesh for our flesh, and his life for our lives."[3] This suffering on behalf of others becomes the example for Christians to follow: "You see, dear friends, the kind of pattern that has been given to us. For if the Lord so humbled himself, what should we do, who through him have come under the yoke of his grace?"[4] In another approach, the *Letter to Diognetus* exalted the transaction that took place between Christ and sinners worthy of punishment and death:

> O, the surpassing kindness and love of God! He did not hate us, or reject us, or bear a grudge against us. Instead, he was patient and forbearing; in his mercy he took upon himself our sins. He himself gave up his own Son as a ransom for us—the holy one for the lawless, the guiltless for the guilty, "the just for the unjust" (1 Pet. 3:18), the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else but his righteousness could have covered our sins? In whom was it possible for us, the lawless and ungodly, to be justified, except in the Son of God alone? O the sweet exchange! O the incomprehensible work of God! O the unexpected blessings, that the sinfulness of many should be hid-

> den in one righteous man, while the righteousness of one should justify many sinners![5]

The early church focused discussion on different aspects of Christ's work as well. Rehearsing the themes of the curse and healing, Justin Martyr explained, "The Father of all wished his Christ to take upon himself the curses of the entire human family—while knowing that, after he had been crucified and died, he would raise him up.… His Father wished him to suffer this, in order that by his stripes the human race might be healed."[6] Melito developed the theme of redemption by means of sacrifice, playing off the offering of Isaac (Gen 22): "In place of Isaac the just, a ram appeared for slaughter, in order that Isaac might be liberated from his bonds. The slaughter of this animal redeemed Isaac from death. Similarly, the Lord, being slain, saved us; being bound, he freed us; being sacrificed, he redeemed us."[7] Similarly, Irenaeus appealed to Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac to portray Christ's work of redemption through his sacrificial death: "According to his faith, Abraham followed the command of the Word of God. With a ready mind, he delivered up, as a sacrifice to God, his only begotten and beloved son, in order that God also might be pleased to offer up for all his offspring his own beloved and only-begotten Son, as a sacrifice for our redemption."[8]

Irenaeus was also responsible for formulating one of the earliest well-developed views of the atonement, called *the recapitulation theory*: "When the Son of God was incarnate and made man, he recapitulated—or summed up—in himself the long line of the human race. In so doing he obtained salvation for us in a brief and complete way, so that what we had lost in Adam—that is, to be according to the image and likeness of God—we could recover in Jesus Christ."[9] Irenaeus' model focused on the events in the life of Jesus Christ as the recapitulation, or summation, of all the life events of fallen humanity. However, instead of these being lived out in disobedience to God, Christ lived them obediently. Therefore, he reversed the sinful direction in which people were headed, saved them, and provided them with a new orientation:

> Jesus Christ came to save all humanity through means of himself—all, I say, who through him are born again to God—infants, children, boys, young men and old. Therefore, he passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children, thus, sanctifying those who are of this age (at the same time becoming an example of holiness, righteousness and submission); a young man for youths, becoming an example to young men and thus sanctifying them for the Lord. Similarly, he was an old man for old men, that he might be a perfect master for all, not merely in regard to setting forth the truth but also in regard to age, sanctifying at the same time the aged also, and becoming an example to them as well.[10]

Thus, Christ's life repeated the course of human existence, with this important difference: the sinful course was reversed, and Christ's obedient life was exchanged for it.

But it was not only the curse-reversing *life* of Jesus Christ that Irenaeus emphasized; he also saw Christ's *death* as undoing human disobedience:

> In order to do away with that disobedience of humanity that had occurred at the beginning by means of a tree, "he became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8). By this he rectified that disobedience that had occurred by means of a tree through that obedi-

> ence that was on the tree—that is, the cross. We had offended God in the first Adam, when he did not obey God's commandment. In the second Adam, however, we are reconciled, being made obedient even unto death.[11]

Thus, according to Irenaeus' recapitulation theory, what Adam is to disobedience, Christ—through both his life and death—is to obedience: "For as by the disobedience of the one man—who was originally formed from virgin soil—the many were made sinners and forfeited life, so was it necessary that, by the obedience of one man—who was originally born from a virgin—many should be justified and receive salvation."[12]

Another common theme in the early church's understanding of the atonement was rescue from Satan, the enemy of humanity. The person most commonly associated with this view is Origen, who popularized *the ransom to Satan theory* of Christ's work: "Christ submitted to death, purchasing us back by his own blood from him who had got us into his power, sold under sin." For Origen, Satan had usurped God's rightful ownership of human beings; thus, all people illegitimately belong to Satan. Christ's death was the ransom that was paid to release people from this tragic situation, and the ransom was paid to Satan. As Origen reasoned, "To whom did Christ give his life a ransom for many? Certainly not to God. Could it then be to the evil one? For he was holding us fast until the ransom should be given him—that is, the life of Jesus—being deceived with the idea that he could have dominion over it, and not seeing that he could not bear the torture in retaining it."[13] Origen's wording made it seem as though Satan was the one who dictated the terms of salvation: "If we are bought with a price, without doubt we are bought by someone whose slaves we were, who also demanded what price he would, to let go from his power those whom he held. Now it was the devil that held us, to whom we had been sold by our sins. Therefore, he demanded the blood of Jesus as our price."[14] Though he demanded Christ for a ransom, Satan did not anticipate the consequences of this transaction, out of his own ignorance.[15] Once Satan had Christ in his clutches, he could not hold him; rather, Satan was forced to let Christ go. Thus, he lost not only his former slaves, who had been ransomed by Christ, but the ransom—Christ himself—as well. Thus, the death of Christ dealt "the first blow in the conflict that is to overthrow the power of that evil spirit, the devil, who had obtained dominion over the whole world."[16]

Popularized by Origen, the ransom to Satan theory was reworked by many who came after him. Strange twists were often added to the basic view. For example, Gregory of Nyssa conceived of Christ's work as an exquisite deception—with God being credited with tricking Satan and causing the loss of his victim.[17] The deception entered by means of Christ's deity being enclosed in human flesh. Lured by the powerful miracles of Christ, Satan desired to conquer him as the ransom for humanity. But Satan was tricked, for he had no idea that hidden under Christ's flesh was the divine nature. Gregory used the metaphor of bait on a fishing line, luring hungry fish:

> In order to be sure that the ransom on our behalf might be easily accepted by Satan who required it, the deity of Christ was hidden under the veil of our human nature. Thus, as with hungry fish, the hook of the deity would be gulped down along with the bait of flesh. In this way, life

> would be introduced into the house of death, and light would shine in the darkness. And so that which is diametrically opposed to light and life would vanish. For it is not the nature of darkness to remain when light is present, nor of death to exist when life is active.[18]

Thus, Gregory of Nyssa presented Satan as a fish that was lured by the bait of Christ's human nature but was then caught by the hook of his divine nature. The ransom that was to be paid to Satan destroyed him and left him with nothing.

Another modification of the ransom theory was made by those who dissented from the idea that the ransom was paid to Satan. For example, John of Damascus proposed that Christ ransomed fallen humanity through his death, but that ransom was given to God the Father because the sin of humanity had been committed against him. Rather than Satan being tricked, it was death that was lured by the bait of Christ's humanity and deceived by his deity.[19]

Though it became the most common view of the work of Christ in the early church, the ransom to Satan theory did not enjoy a monopoly. Some church leaders emphasized the substitutionary nature of the death of Christ. For example, Tertullian presented Christ's death as an atonement for sin, with escape from hell and eternal life in heaven as the results.[20] Similarly, Athanasius described how Christ's sacrifice paid the penalty for the sins of all humanity:

> It was necessary that the debt owed by everyone should be paid, and this debt owed was the death of all people. For this particular reason, Jesus Christ came among us.… He offered up his sacrifice on behalf of all people. He yielded his temple—that is, his body—to death in the place of everyone. And so it was that two wonderful things came to pass at the same time: The death of all people was accomplished in the Lord's body, and death and corruption were completely done away with by reason of the Word that was united with it. For death was necessary, and death must be suffered on behalf of all, so that the debt owed by all might be paid.[21]

Thus, Christ "became to us salvation, and became life, and became propitiation" by offering his death as a sacrifice to pay the penalty for sins.[22]

This idea of substitution was joined with various other themes in Augustine's understanding of the atonement. Focusing on Christ as the one mediator between God and humanity, Augustine noted, "Christ is both the priest who offers and the sacrifice offered."[23] In this dual role, Christ fulfills the four aspects of a fitting sacrifice—*to whom* it is offered, *by whom* it is offered, *what* is offered, and *for whom* it is offered: "The one and true Mediator himself, reconciling us to God by the sacrifice of peace, remained one with the Father to whom he offered it, made one in himself the believers for whom he offered it, and he himself was both the offerer and the offering."[24] Specifically, this sacrifice was for sin: "We came to death through sin; Christ came to it through righteousness. Therefore, as our death is the punishment of sin, so his death was made a sacrifice for sin."[25] Furthermore, this sacrificial death brought redemption for sinners: "Christ, though guiltless, took our punishment, that he might cancel our guilt and do away with our punishment…. Confess that he died, and you may also confess that he, without taking our sin, took its punishment."[26]

In terms of the benefits of Christ's work, Augustine saw the death of Christ as a ransom offered to Satan that liberates

people from his evil power.[27] But he did not limit his discussion to this one benefit. Another benefit is escape from the second death, or eternal death that is meted out on the wicked after the resurrection. For believers, however, the death of Christ rescues from this horrific end.[28] Another benefit is the removal of God's wrath and reconciliation to friendship with God.[29] Furthermore, when Christ's death is viewed as the supreme demonstration of God's love for humanity, a final benefit that flows from it is a stimulus to love God in return.[30] The cross of Christ demonstrates God's love for fallen humanity, and those who see this demonstration are encouraged to respond with love.[31]

In summary, the early church, working from the background of the Old Covenant sacrificial system, the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the writings of the apostles, developed various theories or models.

The Atonement in the Middle Ages

After many centuries of domination by the ransom to Satan theory, a fresh view of the atonement of Christ was offered by Anselm. It is often referred to as *the satisfaction theory*. In his influential book *Why God Became Man,* Anselm set forth the major aspects of his model, beginning with the problem of sin:

> To sin is nothing other than not to give God what is owed to him. What is the debt which we owe to God?… This is righteousness or uprightness of the will. It makes individuals righteous or upright in their heart, that is, their will. This is the sole honor, the complete honor, which we owe to God and which God demands from us.… Someone who does not render to God this honor due to him is taking away from God what is his, and dishonoring God, and this is what it is to sin.[32]

Anselm lived in a feudal system in which overlords provided protection for their serfs, who in turn provided food and services for their lords. In this feudal system, restitution of honor was a key concept. If a serf dishonored his lord by stealing ten chickens, for example, the satisfactory solution to this problem was not merely restoration of what had been stolen—ten chickens. Satisfaction demanded a payment that went beyond what was due, so the serf owed, say, fifteen chickens to his lord. Anselm picked up on this concept of satisfaction, and viewed the solution to human sin in the same light:

> As long as he does not repay what he has taken away, he remains in a state of guilt. And it is not sufficient merely to repay what has been taken away: rather, he ought to pay back more than he took, in proportion to the insult which he has inflicted.… One should observe that when someone repays what he has unlawfully stolen, what he is under an obligation to give is not the same as what it would be possible to demand from him, were it not that he had seized the other person's property. Therefore, everyone who sins is under an obligation to repay to God the honor which he has violently taken from him, and this is the satisfaction which every sinner is obliged to give to God.[33]

At this point, Anselm denied that "it is fitting for God to forgive a sin out of mercy alone, without any restitution of the honor taken from him."[34] Two options remained: "It is a necessary consequence, therefore, that either the honor which has been taken away should be repaid, or punishment should follow."[35] To not restore God's honor is unthinkable, so Anselm focused on a satisfactory payment for sin:

> It is impossible for God to lose his honor. For either a sinner of his own accord repays what he owes or God will take it from him against his—

> the sinner's—will. This is because either a man of his own free will demonstrates the submission which he owes to God by not sinning, or alternatively by paying recompense for his sin, or else God brings him to torment, and in this way he shows that he is his Lord, something which the man himself refuses to admit voluntarily.[36]

Perhaps, then, God could simply punish all humanity—each and every person—for his or her sins. That would satisfy his justice. But Anselm could not accept this idea, for a reason that he picked up from Augustine: God cannot punish every human being, because a number of human beings equal to the number of fallen angels must be saved.[37] This would restore the original creation to its balance and harmony. So satisfaction for sin—in one way or another—is necessary.[38]

Could it be that a man could pay the debt himself? Anselm imagined what could be offered to God as a payment for sin: "Penitence, a contrite and broken heart, fasting and many kinds of bodily labor, the showing of pity through giving and forgiveness, and obedience."[39] But Anselm quickly dismissed these as things already owed to God.[40] Thus, if owed to God, these things cannot be given to him in payment for sin. And there is another problem as well:

> Because of the man who was conquered [Adam, in the fall], the whole of humanity is rotten and, as it were, in a ferment with sin—and God raises up no one with sin to fill up the complement of the renowned heavenly city. Correspondingly, supposing a man were victorious, because of him as many humans would be brought out of sin into a state of righteousness as would make up that full number…for the completion of which mankind was created. But a man who is a sinner is in no way capable of doing this, for one sinner cannot make another sinner righteous.[41]

So man is helpless to save himself.

For Anselm, the only one who can save humanity is one who is both God and man:

> [Satisfaction] cannot come about unless there should be someone who would make a payment to God greater than everything that exists apart from God.… It is also a necessity that someone who can give to God from his own property something which exceeds everything which is inferior to God, must himself be superior to everything that exists apart from God.… Now, there is nothing superior to all that exists which is not God—except God.… But the obligation rests with man, and no one else, to make the payment.… Otherwise, man is not making recompense. If, therefore … no one can pay except God, and no one ought to pay except man: it is necessary that a God-man should pay it.[42]

Therefore, Jesus Christ, the God-man, is the only one who can offer satisfaction for the sin of humanity. Moreover:

> He ought to possess something… which he may give to God voluntarily and not in payment of a debt.… If we say that he will make a present of himself as an act of obedience to God…this will not constitute giving something which God does not demand from him in repayment of a debt. For every rational creature owes this obedience to God. [But] to hand himself over to death, for the honor of God…is not something which God will demand from him, in repayment of a debt, given that, since there will be no sin in him, he will be under no obligation to die.[43]

Thus, the death of Christ is the sufficient and necessary satisfaction that he willingly offered to God. In doing so, Christ obtained a reward, but it was a reward that he did not need. It only makes sense

that Christ would give this reward to fallen human beings, "for whose salvation … he made himself a man."[44] So Christ directs that his reward should be given to sinners so as to provide satisfaction for their sins, and the Father gives redemption to all who embrace the Son.[45] In this way, Anselm explained the work of Christ in terms of the satisfaction theory of the atonement.

While reaction to Anselm's theory was generally positive, dissenters expressed contempt for his view. Chief among these was Abelard, who originated *the moral influence theory* of the atonement. Actually, he rejected both of the prevalent theories of his time—the ransom to Satan theory and Anselm's satisfaction view. In their place he proposed another position: "I think that the purpose and cause of the incarnation was that Christ might illuminate the world by his wisdom and excite it to the love of himself."[46] What people need, according to Abelard, is a persuasive exhibition of God's love. Christ provided this demonstration by his life and especially by his death, the crowning act of love: "Our redemption is that supreme love shown in our case by the passion of Christ. This not only liberates us from slavery to sin, but also wins from us the true freedom of the children of God, so that we may fulfill all things from love rather than from fear."[47] The work of Christ, being an exhibition of divine love, stimulates people to love God.[48] In short, Abelard did not minimize the death of Christ, but he denied that it has a necessary connection to the forgiveness of sins. Also, he removed the atonement from an objective reality—what Christ accomplished on the cross—to a subjective influence on people—it kindles within them a love for God. This, for Abelard, is the heart of the Christian faith: "Christ died for us in order to show how great was his love for humanity and to prove that love is the essence of Christianity."[49]

In discussing Christ's atoning work, Thomas Aquinas developed Anselm's idea that Christ went beyond the call of duty in dying—his was a work of *supererogation*.[50] For Anselm, this had meant that Christ's infinite satisfaction through his death could be applied to the infinite penalty accumulated by humanity's sin. But Aquinas viewed both the life and the death of Christ as "a superabundant atonement for the sins of humanity."[51] This atonement, according to Aquinas, has to be appropriated by several means: "Christ's suffering works its effect in those to whom it is applied, through faith and love and the sacraments of faith."[52] Specifically, these sacraments are baptism—to remove original sin and actual sins committed before baptism—and penance—to deal with actual sins committed after baptism.[53] Thus, while affirming that Christ's death was a superabundant atonement, Aquinas held that a human cooperation with the work of Christ is necessary. Faith, love, and participation in the sacraments unite people to the atonement of Christ and become a necessary part of it. It is easy to see how this idea could turn into a system of human works designed to merit the grace and forgiveness of God. This was one of the reasons that people like Martin Luther and John Calvin sought to reform the church.

Atonement during the Reformation and Post-Reformation

The Reformers introduced another view of the atonement, generally called *the penal substitutionary theory*. In some ways, it was similar to Anselm's satisfac-

tion theory, but with this major difference: Instead of grounding the atonement in the honor of God—that of which God had been robbed by the sin of humanity—the Reformers grounded it in the justice of God. Because he is holy, God hates sin with wrathful anger and acts against it by condemning and punishing sin. Thus, an eternal penalty must be paid for sin. Humanity could not atone for its own sin, but Christ did: as the substitute for humanity, he died as a sacrifice to pay the penalty, suffered the divine wrath against sin, and removed its condemnation forever.

Martin Luther expressed the penal substitutionary theory in this way:

> An eternal, unchangeable sentence of condemnation has been passed—for God cannot and will not regard sin with favor, but his wrath abides upon it eternally and irrevocably. For this reason, redemption was not possible without a ransom of such precious worth as to atone for sin, to assume its guilt, pay the price of the wrath and thus abolish sin. This no creature was able to do. There was no remedy except for God's only Son to step into our distress and himself become man, to take upon himself the load of awful and eternal wrath and make his own body and blood a sacrifice for sin. And he did so, out of the immeasurable great mercy and love toward us, giving himself up and bearing the sentence of unending wrath and death.[54]

Luther emphasized the dreadful state in which sinful humanity finds itself, due specifically to its failure to obey God's law. This results in a curse on all people. Jesus Christ accomplished salvation by bearing the curse for everyone: "Putting off his innocence and holiness, and putting on your sinful person, he bore your sin, death and curse. He became a sacrifice and a curse for you, in order to set you free from the curse of the law."[55] Luther specified that Christ became this sacrifice and curse by dying on the cross as a substitute for sinful human beings.[56] This sacrifice, then, is a propitiation: "Christ … truly born, suffered was crucified, died, and was buried, in order to be a sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to propitiate God's wrath."[57] In so doing, Luther contributed to the development of the doctrine of the atonement.

John Calvin located the penal substitutionary atonement within Christ's larger work of exercising the three offices of prophet, king, and priest.[58] As priest, Christ reconciles sinful people to God by his sacrificial death:

> As a pure and stainless mediator, Christ is by his holiness to reconcile us to God. But God's righteous curse bars our access to him, and God in his capacity as judge is angry toward us. Thus, an expiation must intervene in order that Christ as priest may obtain God's favor for us and appease his wrath. Thus, to perform this office, Christ had to come forward with a sacrifice. The priestly office belongs to Christ alone because by the sacrifice of his death, he blotted out our own guilt and made satisfaction for our sins.[59]

In discussing the details of Christ's atonement, Calvin emphasized several key points: Atonement is necessary because of God's righteous wrath against sin. Calvin described the situation of a typical sinner: "Scripture teaches that he was estranged from God through sin, is an heir of wrath, subject to the curse of eternal death, excluded from all hope of salvation, beyond every blessing of God, the slave of Satan, captive under the yoke of sin, destined finally for a dreadful destruction and already involved in it."[60] The atoning work of Christ intervened

into this human nightmare. Involved in this work were substitution, cleansing, expiation (removing the liability to suffer punishment through satisfaction), and propitiation (appeasing the divine wrath).[61]

According to Calvin, it was not only by his death that Christ accomplished all of this; his life of obedience was also involved: "From the time when he took on the form of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us."[62] But this life of obedience was not the key element: "To define the way of salvation more exactly, Scripture ascribes this especially and properly to Christ's death."[63] Calvin underscored the voluntary nature of this death. And he emphasized that Christ died as an innocent and righteous man, in place of sinful humanity.[64] Thus, "the guilt that held us liable for punishment has been transferred to the head of the Son of God."[65]

Furthermore, the very form of death suffered by Christ—crucifixion—was meaningful for Calvin. By dying on a cross, Christ became the curse for humanity: "The cross was accursed, not only in human opinion but by decree of God (Deut. 21:23). Thus, when Christ is hanged upon the cross, he makes himself subject to the curse. It had to happen in this way in order that the whole curse—which on account of our sins awaited us, or rather lay upon us—might be lifted from us, while it was transferred to him."[66] And by dying as a sacrifice, as pictured in the sacrifices under the Old Covenant, Christ removed the wrath of God against humanity:

> What was figuratively represented in the Mosaic sacrifices is manifested in Christ, the archetype of the figures. Therefore, to perform a perfect expiation, he gave his own life as an *Asham*—that is, as an expiatory offering for sin—upon which our stain and punishment might somehow be cast and cease to be imputed to us. The Son of God, utterly clean of all fault, nevertheless took upon himself and the shame and reproach of our iniquities and in return clothes us with his purity![67]

Thus, in terms of benefits for humanity, "we have in Christ's death the complete fulfillment of salvation, for through it we are reconciled to God, his righteous judgment is satisfied, the curse is removed, and the penalty paid in full."[68]

Calvin and Luther focused on the atonement as a penal substitution, Christ paying the penalty of death as a substitute for sinful humanity. Lutheran and Reformed theology following them continued to develop this theory. For example, the Lutheran *Formula of Concord,* speaking about condemned people, affirmed

> [I]t is their duty to believe that Jesus Christ has expiated all their sins and made satisfaction for them. He has also obtained remission of sins, righteousness before God, and eternal life, without the intervention of any merit on their part.[69]

Similarly, the Reformed *Belgic Confession* described the multi-faceted nature of the atonement:

> We believe that Jesus Christ is ordained with an oath to be an eternal high priest. He presented himself on our behalf before the Father, appeased his wrath by his full satisfaction, offered himself on the tree of the cross, and poured out his precious blood to purge away our sins. He suffered all this for the remission of our sins.[70]

Furthermore, the Reformed *Heidelberg Catechism* echoed much of Anselm's satisfaction theory, with the key difference introduced by the Reformers: Instead of

grounding the atonement in the honor of God, it focused on the holiness of God as its foundation.[71] Thus, the penal-substitutionary theory of the atonement was developed during the Reformation.

Although this theory became the standard view of the atonement among Protestants, it did not go unchallenged. The heretical Socinians developed a view similar in some ways to Abelard's moral influence theory; it is called *the example theory* of the atonement. Like Abelard's position, it rejected the idea that God, because he is just, punishes sin by meting out judgment.[72] Indeed, for Faustus Socinus, founder of the movement, justice leading to punishment, and mercy leading to forgiveness, are completely contradictory. Thus, if Jesus Christ suffered punishment to satisfy the justice of God, there can be no mercy leading to forgiveness. However, we know that God is merciful. This means that he forgives sin without demanding that his justice is satisfied. This is possible because divine justice and mercy are a matter of the will, and so God can simply choose not to exercise his justice:

> There is no such justice in God that absolutely and inexorably requires that sin is punished and that God himself cannot repudiate. There is a kind of justice that we are accustomed to call by this name and that is seen only in punishment of sin. But the Scriptures by no means dignify this with the name of justice; rather, they call it wrath or anger. Thus, they are greatly in error who, deceived by the common use of the word justice, suppose that justice in this sense is a perpetual attribute of God and affirm that it is infinite.[73]

Because God could choose not to exercise his justice, he willed to exercise his mercy instead. Therefore, Christ did not have to offer himself as a satisfaction to God. As Socinus argued, "Why should God have willed to kill his innocent Son by a cruel and damnable death when there was no need of satisfaction? If this were the way, both the generosity of God would perish and we would invent for ourselves a God who is base and sordid."[74]

Socinianism also maintained that Jesus was an unusually holy man who was equipped with the power of God, but who was not God himself. It pointed to this powerful example of virtue and integrity in the life of Jesus as the model for all humanity to follow. The crowning moment of his exemplary life was Jesus' death, the supreme act of obedience. Thus, by his life and death, Jesus provides a wonderful example that moves people to break with their sins and live holy lives: "Christ takes away sins because by heavenly promises he attracts and is strong to move all people to repentance, by which sins are destroyed. He draws all who have not lost hope to leave their sins and zealously to embrace righteousness and holiness."[75] Like Abelard's moral influence theory, the Socinian example theory removed the atonement from an objective reality—what Christ accomplished on the cross—to a subjective influence on people—it moves them to receive the forgiveness of God, which he wills to exercise instead of his justice.

Hugo Grotius disagreed with the Socinians that God does not require a payment for sin, for he could not will to set aside his justice and simply show mercy by forgiving sinful people. But Grotius also rejected the Reformers' idea that Christ's death is a propitiation that removes God's wrath from sinners. So he developed a new view of Christ's work, called *the governmental theory* of the atonement.

Grotius' position envisioned God as

Governor of the universe—thus, the name *governmental theory*. As Governor, God could choose to relax his standards and forgive sinful people through his mercy. This was due to the fact that as the Lawgiver, God himself was not subject to his law. Actually, God as Governor could eliminate the law or relax it. The former was the option that Socinus had chosen. Grotius opted for the latter. And he based God's relaxation of the law on two goods, both of which would have been eliminated had God as Judge strictly upheld the law: "If all humanity had been given over to eternal death as sinners, two most beautiful things would have perished from the earth: reverential piety toward God on the part of humanity, and the demonstration of a wonderful goodness toward humanity on the part of God."[76] But why did God not simply eliminate the law entirely and be merciful toward sinful people? Citing Isa 42:21 ("It pleased the Lord for the sake of his righteousness to make his law great and glorious"), Grotius drew two conclusions: upholding the law to some degree underscored the holiness of God as Governor, and it was in the best interests of the governed for God to support the law in some measure. Grotius called this the "common good—the preservation and example of order."[77]

At this point, Grotius introduced the work of Christ as meeting the requirements of the relaxed law. His death underscored the terrible nature of sin and emphasized that the law must be respected. And Christ's sharing in human nature allied him closely enough with people so that God could mete out punishment on him instead of sinners: "There is nothing unjust in this: That God, whose is the highest authority in all matters not in themselves unjust, and is himself subject to no law, willed to use the sufferings and death of Christ to establish a weighty example against the immense guilt of us all, with whom Christ was most closely allied by nature, by sovereignty, by security."[78] But Christ's sufferings and death did not meet the exact requirements of the divine law; his work only satisfied the less stringent demands of the relaxed law. Thus, Christ's work is only "some sort" of satisfaction. More than anything else, it protected the interests of God's government of the universe.

Grotius summarized his governmental theory:

> Among all the attributes of God, love of the human race stands first. Therefore, though he could justly punish the sins of all people by a worthy and legitimate punishment—that is, eternal death—and though he was moved to do so, God willed to spare those who believe in Christ. But when it was determined to spare them, either by instituting or not some example against so many and so great sins, God most wisely chose that way by which the greatest number of his attributes could be manifested at the same time. These were both his mercy and his severity, or hatred of sin, together with his concern for upholding the law.[79]

By placing God's government of the world and his love for humanity as the highest priorities of God, Grotius developed a theory that dismissed the atonement of Christ as an exact payment of the penalty demanded by the justice of God and expressed in his law. Christ suffered and died, not as a satisfaction for the exact penalty, but as a token of God's concern to uphold his moral law.

Modern Theories of the Atonement

Most Protestants embraced the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement,

originated by the Reformers and developed by their successors. Challenges like those of the Socinians and Hugo Grotius were fairly uncommon and repudiated by most Protestant theologians. But new challenges to the position arose in the modern period and were accepted by more and more churches. Able apologists for the penal substitutionary view also defended and developed that position against these new theories.

William G. T. Shedd was a stalwart defender of this doctrine of the atonement. Affirming that "the atonement of Christ is represented in Scripture as vicarious,"[80] Shedd demonstrated both its substitutionary nature and penal character, the penalty in this case being the sufferings endured by Christ as substitute for sinful human beings.[81] Charles Hodge was another outstanding defended of the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement, which he summarized in the following:

> It is the plain doctrine of Scripture that Christ saves us neither by the mere exercise of power, nor by his doctrine, nor by his example, nor by the moral influence that he exerted, nor by any subjective influence on his people, whether natural or mystical, but as a satisfaction to divine justice, as an expiation for sin and as a ransom from the curse and authority of the law, they reconciling us to God, by making it consistent with his perfections to exercise mercy toward sinners, and then renewing them after his own image, and finally exalting them to all the dignity, excellence, and blessedness of the sons of God.[82]

Hodge also addressed numerous possible objections that had been and would continue to be offered against his view of the atonement. One such objection emphasized the love of God to the exclusion of all the other divine attributes—including the divine justice.[83] A second objection was that "the idea of expiation—the innocent suffering for the guilty and God being thereby propitiated—is declared to be pagan and revolting."[84] Hodge responded: "No one has the right to make one's taste or feelings the test of truth. That a doctrine is disagreeable is no sufficient evidence of its untruth.… So far from being revolting, it is cherished and delighted in as the only hope of the guilty."[85] Both Shedd and Hodge echoed the Reformed doctrine of the atonement and defended it against its many critics.

One such critic was Friedrich Schleiermacher. In *The Christian Faith*, he offered a new theory of the atonement in line with his vision of religion as a feeling of absolute dependence on God. But God, for Schleiermacher, is not a personal, transcendent being. Rather, God is the infinite spiritual reality that flows through all that exists. Christianity, therefore, is not about doctrines and beliefs; rather, it is about the heart, nurturing the intuitive awareness of being united with, and dependent on, this world spirit that pervades everything. With this notion of religion, Schleiermacher maintained that Christ redeemed humanity from this sinful power by providing the supreme example of a man in whom the intuitive sense of dependence on God was nurtured. He was not the God-man; rather, "the Redeemer is like all people in virtue of the identity of human nature, but distinguished from them all by the constant potency of his God-consciousness, which was a real existence of God in him."[86] Because of this, "the Redeemer assumes believers into the power of his God-consciousness, and this is his redemptive activity."[87] Thus, Schleiermacher developed a completely subjective idea of the atonement.

In the twentieth century, Gustav Aulen rehabilitated the ancient *Christ as Victor theory*. In his book, *Christus Victor*, Aulen set forth this view of the atonement: "Its central theme is the idea of the atonement as a divine conflict and victory: Christ—*Christus Victor*—fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the 'tyrants' under which humanity is in bondage and suffering. In him God reconciles the world to himself."[88] These powers holding humanity in slavery include sin, death, the law, and demonic forces. Joining together sin and death, Aulen offered, "Sin takes the central place among the powers that hold man in bondage; all the others stand in direct relation to it. Above all, death, which is sometimes almost personified as 'the last enemy that will be destroyed' (1 Cor. 15:26), is most closely connected with sin. Where sin reigns, there death reigns also."[89] As for the law enslaving humanity, Aulen explained, "The way of legal righteousness that the law recommends or, rather, demands, can never lead to salvation and life. It leads, like the way of human merit, not to God but away from God, and deeper and deeper into sin."[90] The final group that holds humanity in its sway is the demonic realm: "The array of hostile forces includes also the complex of demonic 'principalities,' 'powers,' 'thrones,' 'dominions' that rule in 'this present evil age' (Gal. 1:4) but over which Christ has prevailed. There is comparatively little direct mention of the devil, but he is without doubt regarded as standing behind the demonic hosts as their chief."[91] For support for his view, Aulen appealed to many passages of Scripture (Col 2:15; 1 John 3:8; 5:19) that emphasize Christ's victory over evil forces. Aulen also marshaled historical evidence in support of his view. For example, he reinterpreted the recapitulation theory of Irenaeus and the penal substitutionary theory of Martin Luther so that they agreed with his position. Of course, he also pointed to the many ransom to Satan theories, insisting that his Christ the Victor theory was at the core of all of these.[92]

Though not written specifically in response to Aulen's model, J. I. Packer's "What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution" became one of the most important expressions of this theory of the atonement. According to Packer, the classical model is anchored

> within the world of moral law, guilty conscience, and retributive justice. Thus is forged a conceptual instrument for conveying the thought that God remits our sins and accepts our persons into favour not because of any amends we have attempted, but because the penalty which was our due was diverted on to Christ. The notion which the phrase "penal substitution" expresses is that Jesus Christ our Lord, moved by a love that was determined to do everything necessary to save us, endured and exhausted the destructive divine judgment for which we were otherwise inescapably destined, and so won us forgiveness, adoption and glory. To affirm penal substitution is to say that believers are in debt to Christ specifically for this, and that this is the mainspring of all their joy, peace and praise both now and for eternity.[93]

The penal substitutionary model continued to find able defenders.

In the twenty-first century, the doctrine of the atonement has come under fierce attack. Particularly singled out for criticism is the penal-substitutionary theory because, according to its detractors, it privileges one (outmoded) metaphor of the atonement, it fosters passivity in the face of evil and oppression, and it even

encourages child abuse. Some evangelicals, disturbed by these criticisms, have sought to revise the traditional doctrine. Many evangelicals, however, rehearse and defend the penal substitutionary model.[94]

In conclusion, what does the history of the doctrine of the atonement teach Christians and churches today? Three important lessons can be learned. First, we should resist attempts at reducing the multifaceted wonder of Christ's atoning work to any one particular element of it. Still, a focus on the penal-substitutionary element has strong biblical warrant. Second, theologians should be encouraged to continue the development of this doctrine, recognizing that one reason for the proliferation of theories of the atonement has been a general failure to construct the doctrine within its proper biblical-theological framework. Third, all Christians and churches should give great praise and thanksgiving to God for the gracious and costly work of atoning sacrifice by the God-man, the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, on behalf of us created yet fallen human beings.

ENDNOTES

[1]Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 568.

[2]Ibid., 579.

[3]Clement of Rome, *The Letter of the Romans to the Corinthians* 49, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (ed. Michael W. Holmes; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 85.

[4]Ibid., 16. This is the lesson that Clement drew from descriptions of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22.

[5]*Letter to Diognetus* 9, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 547. This is the strongest statement using substitutionary language that we find in the early church.

[6]Justin Martyr, *Dialog with Trypho the Jew* 137, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (10 vols.; ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 1:268. Cf. Justin Martyr, *Dialog with Trypho the Jew* 95.

[7]Melito of Sardis, from the *Catena on Genesis*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:759.

[8]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.5.3, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:467.

[9]Ibid., 3.18.1.

[10]Ibid., 2.22.4.

[11]Ibid., 5.16.3.

[12]Ibid., 3.18.7.

[13]Origen, *Commentary on Matthew 16:8*. Cited in J. N. D. Kelley, *Early Christian Doctrines* (rev. ed; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978), 185.

[14]Origen, *Homilies in Romans*, 2:13. Cited in H. D. McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ in Faith, Revelation, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 142.

[15]Origen, *Homilies in Ps.* 35 (34):8. Cited in R. S. Franks, *The Work of Christ: A Historical Study of Christian Doctrine* (Nelson's Library of Theology; ed. H. H. Rowley; London: Thomas Nelson and Sons), 40.

[16]Origen, *Against Celsus* 7:17, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 4:617. Though certainly a questionable theory of Christ's work, seeing that it lacks extensive biblical support, the ransom to Satan theory was only one aspect of Origen's overall understanding of the death of Christ. He also placed a strong (and biblical) emphasis on Christ's death being a vicarious substitution (e.g., *Homilies in John* 28.19.165. Cited in Kelley, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 186. Cf. *Homilies in John* 28.14; and *Homilies in Numbers* 14.1. Cited in Franks, *The Work of Christ*, 41).

[17]Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism* 22-23, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (second series; 14 vols.; ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 5:492-93.

[18]Ibid., 24.

[19]John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 3.27.

[20]Tertullian, *On Flight in Persecution*, 12, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 4:123.

[21]Athansius, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 20, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 4:47.

[22]Athansius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians* 1.63, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene*, 4:343.

[23]Augustine, *The City of God* 10.20, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (first series; ed. Philip Schaff; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 2:193.

[24]Augustine, *On the Trinity* 4.14.19, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (first series), 3:79.

[25]Ibid., 4.12.15.

[26]Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichean* 14:4, 7, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (first series), 4:208-09.

[27]Augustine, *Sermon* 163.1. Cited in Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei* (3rd ed.; New York: Cambridge University, 2005), 29.

[28]Augustine, *The City of God* 13.11.

[29]Augustine, *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love* 33, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Father*s (first series), 3.249.

[30]Augustine, *On the Trinity* 13.10.13.

[31]Augustine, *De catechizandis rudibus*, 4.7. Cited in McDonald, *Atonement*, 161.

[32]Anselm, *Why God Became Man* 1.11, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans; Oxford World's Classics; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 283. In the original, "honour" and "dishonouring" have been changed to "honor" and "dishonoring" to reflect American English spelling.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid., 1.12.

[35]Ibid., 1.13.

[36]Ibid., 1.14.

[37]Ibid., 1.16. Augustine expressed this idea in his *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love* 29.

[38]Anselm, *Why God Became Man* 1.19.

[39]Ibid., 1.20.

[40]Ibid.

[41]Ibid., 1.23.

[42]Ibid., 2.6.

[43]Ibid., 2.11.

[44]Ibid., 2.19.

[45]Ibid., 2.20.

[46]Council of Sens. Cited in McDonald, *Atonement*, 174.

[47]Peter Abelard, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans, The Epitome of Christian Doctrine*, comment on Romans 3:26. Cited in ibid., 175.

[48]Ibid., 175-176.

[49]Peter Abelard, *Sentences*, 23; and *Exposition of the Letter to the Romans*. Cited in Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:374. Reaction to Abelard's view was quick. Its chief opponent was Bernard of Clairvaux, who wrote to the pope with his concerns: "What benefit is there for Christ to instruct by example us if he did not first restore us by his grace? Are we not instructed in vain if the body of sin is not first destroyed in us, so that we may no longer serve sin? … Thus, we also affirm that it is necessary for righteousness to be restored to us by Christ—not by instruction, but by regeneration and by righteousness of life (Rom. 5:18)." Bernard of Clairvaux, "To Pope Innocent, Against Certain Heads of Abelard's Heresies," *Letter* 190.23, in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, microfiche, 589. In keeping with these concerns, the Council of Sens, in 1140, condemned Abelard's moral influence theory for being incomplete.

[50]*Supererogation* comes from two Greek works indicating "a work that goes beyond" what is required.

[51]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, part 3, question 48, article 2.

[52]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, part 3, question 49, article 3.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Martin Luther, *Epistle Sermon. Twenty-fourth Sunday after Trinity*. Cited in McDonald, *Atonement*, 182.

[55]Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 26:288. Cited in ibid., 183.

[56]Ibid., 26:279.

[57]*Augsburg Confession*, article 3.

[58]John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vol.; ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:495.

[59]Ibid., 1:501-02.

[60]Ibid., 1:505.

[61]Ibid.

[62]Ibid., 1:507.

[63]Ibid.

[64]For Calvin, Christ's condemnation before Pontius Pilate, a mere "moral man," taught this lesson. Ibid., 1:508-09.

[65]Ibid., 1:509-10.

[66]Ibid., 1:510.

[67]Ibid.

[68]Ibid., 1:520.

[69]*The Formula of Concord*, article 5, 4, in *The Evangelical and Protestant Creeds* (vol. 3 of *The Creeds of Christendom*; ed. Philip Schaff; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 127.

[70]*The Belgic Confession*, article 21. in ibid., 406-07.

[71]*The Heidelberg Catechism*, questions 12-18, in ibid., 311-13.

[72]Faustus Socinus, *De Jesu Christo Servatore* 3.1. Cited in McDonald, *Atonement*, 197.

[73]Faustus Socinus, *De Jesu Christo Servatore* 1.2. Cited in ibid., 198.

[74]Ibid., 198.

[75]Faustus Socinus, *Praelectiones Theologia* 591. Cited by L. W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 287.

[76]Hugo Grotius, *Defense of the Catholic Faith on the Satisfaction of Christ, against F. Socinus* 3. Cited in McDonald, *Atonement*, 204.

[77]Ibid., 4.

[78]Ibid.

[79]Ibid., 5.

[80]William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (3rd ed.; ed. Alan W. Gomes; Phillipsburg: P & R, 2003), 690.

[81]Ibid., 690-719.

[82]Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 2:520.

[83]See Ibid., 2:495-543.

[84]Ibid.

[85]Ibid.

[86]Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 385.

[87]Ibid., 425.

[88]Gustav Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Atonement* (London: SPCK, 1931), 20.

[89]Ibid., 83.

[90]Ibid., 84.

[91]Ibid., 86.

[92]The response to Aulen's proposal was mixed. On the one hand, many appreciated his emphasis on the victory that Christ achieved over sin, death, the law, and demonic forces. On this point, they granted that Aulen was correct and right in drawing the church's attention to a much-overlooked aspect of the atonement. On the other hand, many decried the one-sidedness of his position: It both overlooked crucial biblical data that emphasized other aspects of the atonement and twisted the views of Irenaeus and Luther to fit in with its understanding. Still others noted that the victory achieved by Christ over sin, death, the law, and demonic forces was the *result* of his work on the cross, not the actual work itself.

[93] J. I. Packer, "What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution," *Tyndale Bulletin* 25 (1974), 3-45.

[94]See, e.g., John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986).