No Greater Love Than This:
Violence, Nonviolence, and the Atonement

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Abstract

“No Greater Love Than This: Violence, Nonviolence, and the Atonement” looks at the role of violence in the discussion of the atonement. This is accomplished by first examining a number of well-known atonement theories including Anselm’s substitutionary theory, Abelard’s moral exemplar, ransom theory, and Christus Victor for their connection to violence. Then, three less well-known theories such as Julian of Norwich’s theory, Patrick Cheng’s theosis theory, and womanist theories will be looked at in light of their connection to violence. Finally, a proposed theory of atonement, which attempts to be as low-violence as possible, will be presented. Throughout the thesis, the topics of what is violence and why a nonviolent atonement theory is needed will be addressed.
Introduction

For many, the concept of atonement, if it is even known, is strongly connected with the theories of substitutionary atonement and penal substitutionary atonement. This majority opinion on the atonement has been rather omnipresent in the social consciousness of society, thus writing about other understandings of the atonement would bring to the fore a very important discussion.

This will bring up many issues connected to violence in general, issues that can be exponentially increased when understood to be connected to a topic such as the atonement. The world of the early twenty-first century is a world ensnared by violence. Whether it is war, uprisings and revolutions, high-profile murder cases, or terrorist attacks, it can be difficult at times to even see the news without hearing of violence of one manner or another. For some ensnared in the violence of the world, whether by structural sin or other means, the concept that even the atonement—a doctrine of unity—might be ensnared in violence as well can be disheartening. By looking at nonviolent atonement theories, alternative theories that might work better for those in these situations can appear.

This brings up the question, what exactly is atonement? The word atonement is a portmanteau—“at-one-ment”—that is used as a sort of shorthand for any discussion of the interaction of sin and grace with regards to the redemption of humanity. The Oxford English dictionary defines it as:

†1. The condition of being at one with others; unity of feeling, harmony, concord, agreement. †2. The action of setting at one, or condition of being set at one, after discord or strife: a. Restoration of friendly relations between persons who have been at variance; reconciliation. Obs. †b. The settling of differences, staunching of strife; appeasement. Obs. †c. The means or agent of appeasement.
Atonement is a central, yet complex, topic of Christian theology with complex, expansive, and varied, nuances. Part of this complexity arises from the fact that atonement involves humanity attempting to in some way understand an event that is beyond our frame of reference, beginning within the Godhead’s inner conversation and extending to God’s visible work in the world such as the incarnation. Because of this, a second level of complexity is introduced, as the only way language can encompass this discussion is through the use of theory—stating for the sake of comparison that two distinctly different things are the same—each theory having subjective positive and negative aspects inherent to them. Because of the complex nature of the atonement, there has never been one doctrinally sanctioned theory for the atonement. Christians across the ages and across the world can hold vastly different views of the atonement, and all still be perfectly orthodox Christians.

The purpose of this work is to examine four theories of the atonement that have held great sway at one time or another with regard to the role of violence attached, either in the actual theory, or by later understandings of the theory. To begin, in order to give a concrete example of the complexity of the atonement, Romans 3:21-26 and Romans 5:6-11 will be examined with regard to these passages’ influence on the doctrine of the atonement. Next, two traditional theories of the atonement will be analyzed: Ransom and

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Anselm’s substitutionary atonement. Then two of the “non-violent” atonement theory will be addressed: Abelard’s moral exemplar and Christus Victor. These four theories will then be compared with regard to their level of violence. Finally, three alternative theories will presented that reduce the violence of the imagery. Throughout the thesis, one prominent dialogue partner is Karl Barth. Barth was chosen for both his extensive writings on both Romans and the work of Christ, as well as for the effect he has had on modern theology.
Chapter One

Romans

Two passages, Romans 3:21-26 and Romans 5:6-11, in particular, are central to a number of atonement theories, including sacrifice and divine patronage. To look at the concepts of atonement we are addressing it is crucial to begin with a look at these passages.

Romans 3:21-26

Romans 3:21-26 sits in the context of a discussion of the universality of God’s judgment (Romans 3:10-20). After laying out the case against humanity, Paul shifts topics from judgment to salvation:

But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ; for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement; by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:21-26)

The portion of the passage that describes Christ’s death (Rom. 3:25-26a) uses imagery of the Day of Atonement in its description of Christ’s death. In this concept, rather than an animal being sacrificed and its blood being used to purify the high altar of the sins of the people, Christ is the sacrifice, and it is his blood that is the purifying agent for the sins of all, in a way activated through faith. In this new concept of atonement,

\[\text{Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations refer to the New Revised Standard Version. Interpretation of this passage is further complicated by the fact that verses 25 and 26a are thought to be confessional or liturgical fragments inserted into the passage, as there are a number of terms that appear only here in the undisputed letters of Paul. For further discussion, see Robert Jewett, }\text{ Romans: A Commentary, or Arland Hultgren, }\text{Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary.}\]
Christ acts as both sacrifice and priest. Rather than having to be a yearly event, purifying the people of their sins over and over, Christ’s sacrifice is done only once, purifying the people of their sins for all time: past, present, and future.

Seeking a new concept of atoning for sins was not unique to Christianity in the first century. Members of the Qumran community, a group of ascetic Jewish men, “hoped for an eschatological temple to replace the corrupt temple in Jerusalem.” Instead of a new physical temple this text “celebrates the death of Jesus as having established a new ‘place of atonement, epiphany, and the presence of God.’” So while others strived to create the old forms of atonement in a new place in Romans we have proclaimed that “Christ provided a new means of access to God that reached beyond the sins of Israel.” An atonement that is no longer bound by a physical location, be it the temple of Jerusalem or that of the ascetic desert.

It is important to look at the description of Christ’s death found in chapter 3 through the lens of the honor-shame system that existed in the Greco-Roman world. In this worldview, a gift is given to humanity: “…God reestablishes a relationship characterized by honor/glory through a ‘gift’ (v. 24). That gift is none other than God putting forward God’s own Son, Jesus Christ, as an expiation through his death (v. 25).”

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4 Jewett, 285.

5 Jewett, Romans, 285-286.

Through this gift, honor is given to those that lack honor in the wider, Roman system, the lowly, and the non-citizens that would make up a fair portion of the gentile Christians. Through giving the Gentiles a chance at reconciliation with God that they never had previously, they are able to gain honor in the honor-shame system of God, which is the opposite of the secular one. In the divine honor/shame system, all who have faith in Christ are equal. All sins have been forgiven—regardless of status in the Greco-Roman world—and all have been given the grace of God.

**Romans 5:6-11**

In Romans 5:6-11 Paul discusses humanity’s justification by faith which began with verse 6:

> For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:6-11)

“Honor and the system of patronage were so much a part of the fabric of society that the Christians in Rome would undoubtedly have understood Paul’s gospel story in terms of this cultural paradigm” With this in mind, one can see that the description of Christ’s death found here plays a distinct counterpoint to the cultural narrative of the Roman

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7 Jewett, *Romans*, 291.

8 Pickett, “The Death of Christ,” 738.
Empire: “In contrast to Greco-Roman culture and particularly to the Roman civic cult, where the hero dies for the honored fatherland, Jesus died for undeserving sinners.”

Christ reverses the status quo of the Greco-Roman world on its head: Rather than dying for those who have honor, he instead dies for all—those that have honor in the secular system, those who do not, and, most importantly, for those have wronged him. If it is a rare thing that anyone would die for a righteous person, then why should anyone die for one who is called ungodly? It is only through the love of God for humanity that this occurs.

One other way that Romans 5:6-11 can be viewed as running counter to Greco-Roman culture can be seen by looking at Christ’s death for humanity through the lens of their system of patronage: “…the narrative world of the letter is firmly embedded in the social world of the Roman empire. More specifically, Paul’s interpretation of the death of Christ in Rom. 5:1-11 is seen to be predicated on the social institution of patronage, which was focused on the pivotal cultural value of honor and model in terms of which all relationships in the Greco-Roman world were structured.”

For someone in the role of patron to give of him or her self to the point of death would not make sense. And to give of oneself so fully for a group that has disobeyed everything that they have been told would make even less sense. Yet God as patron does give fully, showing to all humanity the all-encompassing redemptive work of Christ, revealing to humanity the complete abundance of God’s grace and love for humanity.

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9 Jewett, Romans, 361.


11 Hultgren, Paul’s Letter to the Romans, 208.
In this passage, Christ does not die for the forgiveness of sins. Rather, “Paul’s concern is with overcoming the shameful status of ‘sinner’ through divine love that accepts each person and group without qualification as demonstrated on the cross of Christ.”¹² Through this overcoming of the shameful status as sinners through the act of Christ, humanity gains the honor of having a divine patron that we otherwise would not deserve. No longer does humanity bear the shame of being ungodly, but instead can even boast in our reconciliation with God. (Romans 5:11)

Outside the lens of divine patronage, one other way that this passage can be looked at is the view taken by Karl Barth (1886-1968). For Barth, Christ’s death “means that the new man lives by the dying of Christ, whose life is known only through His Resurrection, from which faith springs (v. 10).”¹³ Barth’s use of the imagery of the new man sets the standard—only through Christ’s reconciling death can anyone have any chance of living.

Quite literally, for Barth, Christ’s death is the center which everything else orbits: “Neither the personality of Jesus, nor the ‘Christ idea,’ nor the Sermon on the Mount, nor His miracles of healing, nor His trust in God…nor the eschatological or the immediate aspects of his teaching concerning the Kingdom of God—none of these things exist in their own right. Everything shines in the light of His death, and is illuminated by it.”¹⁴

Because of this all-encompassing view of Christ’s death, for Barth, faith is, in some

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¹² Jewett, Romans, 361.

¹³ Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 159.

¹⁴ Barth, Epistle to the Romans, 159.
ways, simplified to the fact that Christ died for sinners—and how that is going to affect a person’s relationship with God, now that he or she is a new person because of it:

“[Christ] died for us whilst ‘we’—all that we are and have and do—were weak and godless. How then can this relation between Him and us—between Him, risen from the dead and us, still involved in all the questionable possibilities of a life which has not yet been illuminated by the light of His death—be fundamentally altered? Apart from the faith by which we die with Christ, how can we who live in this world cease to remain both weak and godless? For it is precisely dying with Christ—in virtue of which we shall be what we are not—that establishes the life of the new man.”

For Barth, any relationship humanity can have with God is because of Christ’s death. Without Christ’s death, humanity is weak and godless, and cannot do anything—the relationship between God and humanity is intrinsically changed through Christ’s death.

How can this happen if humanity does not change its behavior? It is the fact that humanity has died with Christ that makes it so humanity can change its behavior, and in so doing better reflect the new relationship between God and humanity.

Atonement in Paul’s Letter to the Romans

“[Romans 3: 21-26] is the most provocative statement in the entire letter—indeed in all of Paul’s letters—concerning the redemptive work of God in Christ. Moreover, every atonement theory in the history of theology has had to come to terms with what Paul says in these verses.”

Along with having to deal with the ramifications of Romans 3, atonement theories throughout the ages have also had to handle other passages from Romans, along with passages from the wider corpus of Paul’s writings. The way that

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15 Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 160-161.

Christ’s death is discussed in Romans 3:21-26, 5:6-11, and 8:31-36, and the wider corpus of Paul’s writings, can be viewed through a number of theories including sacrifice, curse transmission ritual, and honorable death.\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Sacrifice}

Throughout the writings of Paul, there are a number of types of sacrificial theories that are used. Romans 3:21-26, uses the sacrificial theory of the blood of Christ. Jewett, looking at Romans 3:21-26, notes that Christ’s blood has a cleansing role rather than a directly atoning function.\textsuperscript{18} For this reason, “In view of Paul’s other statements about atonement, moreover, it seems unlikely that he shared an expiatory theory, which concentrates so exclusively on the matter of forgiveness, a matter of decidedly secondary interest in his theology. Propitiation also seems far from Paul’s intent.”\textsuperscript{19} Rather than Christ’s blood acting as something to appease God, a propitiation, it instead acts as the ultimate stain-remover—the only stain-remover that can remove the stain of sin on humanity.

Jewett continues “In contrast to expiation, which functions regardless of the behavior or attitude of recipients, atonement in the Pauline sense of reconciliation of those who declared war against God is effective only for those who respond to the good

\textsuperscript{17} Stephen Finlan, \textit{The Background and Content of Paul’s Cultic Atonement Theories} (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 5.

\textsuperscript{18} Jewett, \textit{Romans}, 285.

\textsuperscript{19} Jewett, \textit{Romans}, 286.
news in faith."\textsuperscript{20} This might raise an interesting question, if, in Paul’s view, atonement is only effective for those who respond to the gospel, then is Christ’s death, which is the atoning act, only for some? Are those who do not have faith not included within Christ’s death?

For Jewett the answer is no: “The death of Christ offers universal atonement, moving beyond the boundaries of traditional cultic activities in the ancient world, including the Day of atonement ceremonies in the Jerusalem temple. It conveys divine love for the entire human race, overcoming the deficits of shame that have corrupted history since Adam’s fall.”\textsuperscript{21} The sacrifice of Christ is for all—but not all accept the sacrifice on their behalf. Christ’s atoning act is set apart from all other acts that it can be compared to. It is for all of humanity—past, present, and future—regardless of belief.

The description of Christ taking the place of the temple atonement rite would have been especially powerful for those early Judean Christians. As the temple was the location to encounter God, Christ’s becoming the new place of atonement would have shifted where God was to a location accessible to all.\textsuperscript{22} Through this shift in location, Christ’s atoning act is further set apart from other acts. No more is atonement location-specific, but instead is for all—even those who have never heard of Jerusalem.

\textsuperscript{20} Jewett, Romans, 288.

\textsuperscript{21} Jewett, Romans, 538.

Curse Transmission Ritual

The curse transmission ritual is best known through the concept of the scapegoat. The basic concept of the scapegoat is that the sins of the people performing the ritual would be transferred and placed on a goat, which would then be driven out into the wilderness, taking the sins of the people with it. This ritual would be done yearly. In the curse transmission ritual theory of atonement found in Paul, rather than the sins of a people being placed yearly on a goat, instead the sins of all people, for all time, were placed on Jesus Christ, who bore the sins away for all time. Through this “salvation then occurs as existential exchange: Christ shared the human predicament, while humans participate in his holiness and glory.”

In 2 Corinthians, when Christ’s death is discussed, it is in conjunction with the incarnation of Christ: “that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us...For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor 5:19, 21)

Also, in Philippians, Christ’s humanity is discussed: “…but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form…” (Philippians 2:7) In these passages, Christ’s human nature is at the forefront and plays an integral part. Without the fully human nature that Christ possessed through the incarnation, his death would be radically different, theologically. This, in turn, would affect any study of the passages with regards to the atonement, including which atonement theories a theologian could use.

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Honorable Death

Along with being viewed through the lens of the theory of sacrifice, Romans 3:21-26 can also be viewed through the lens of honorable death. The honorable death involves a general set formula of “‘X died/gave himself for Y’ and which conveys the idea that the death of X is salvific for Y.”\(^\text{24}\) Rather than acting as theories, the honorable death motif “portray[s] Christ’s death as an ‘effective’ death by ascribing meaning to it: They suggest that this death was not in vain, but made a crucial difference for humanity.”\(^\text{25}\)

The extracanonical book of 4 Maccabees discusses the idea of the sins of the nation being atoned by the death of martyrs. This can be seen as somewhat parallel to the discussion of Christ as the “mercy seat” in Romans 3:21-26.\(^\text{26}\) While they are not strictly parallel in that Christ as “mercy seat” applies to all of humanity, rather than just the nation of Israel, “What 4 Mace 17 offers is a precedent of replacing the Day of Atonement ritual with a martyr’s death, making clear that the hymn proclaims Jesus’ blood as a new institution of atonement.”\(^\text{27}\)

The lens of martyrdom can also be seen in 2 Corinthians: “For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for

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\(^{25}\) Eberhart, *The Sacrifice of Jesus*, 125.

\(^{26}\) Jewett, *Romans*, 286.

\(^{27}\) Jewett, *Romans*, 286-287.
him who died and was raised for them.” (2 Cor 5:14-15) In the case of 2 Corinthians, the reasoning behind Christ’s honorable death is the love of God for humanity. This too can be seen in Galatians where it is Christ who in and through death “loved me and gave himself for me.”

Other Views on the Atonement

In Karl Barth’s view of Romans 5: 6-11 the complex nature of atonement theory can be seen. The concept of the sacrifice of blood—and Christ as the new place of atonement—is present in Barth’s view of Romans 5: 6-11: “Christ died for us. For us—that is, in so far as by His death we recognize the law of our own dying; in so far as in His death the invisible God becomes for us visible; in so far as His death is the place where atonement with God takes place (iii. 25, v. 9), and where we, who have rejected our Creator, return to His love; and in so far as His death the paradox of the righteousness and the identity of His holy wrath and His forgiving mercy becomes for us—the Truth.”

Barth also takes into account the honored death view by discussing the fact that “Christ died for us.” With any one passage describing the death of Christ, more often than not, a number of atonement theories, which may or may not work well together, can be found and used. This complexity can be seen in the above passage from Barth. In one sentence, looking at one passage from Romans, Barth has used at least two different, distinct atonement theories.

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28 Pickett, “The Death of Christ,” 731; Galatians 2:20; The concept of honorable death/martyrdom as honorable death for the sake of God’s love for humanity can also be seen in Abelard’s moral exemplar atonement theory discussed later.

29 Barth, Epistle to the Romans, 160.
While God is for us, and our sins have been atoned for, it does not mean that we do not need to concern ourselves with the world—that is cheap grace. What the church wants, and needs, is costly grace: “Above all, grace is costly because it was costly to God, because it cost God the life of God’s Son—‘you were bought with a price’ [1 Cor 6:20]—and because nothing can be cheap to us which is costly to God. Above all, it is grace because the life of God’s Son was not too costly for God to give in order to make us live. Costly grace is the incarnation of God.”\(^{30}\) It can be easy for humanity to rest on our borrowed laurels, thinking that all is well since God has saved us through the atonement and that naught else need be done—whatever happens, regardless of humanity’s behavior, all is well since God is on our side. But humanity mustn’t forget how costly this gift of grace has been.

Romans is a complex narrative containing many theological strands. One strand that weaves though the book of Romans is a discussion of Christ’s death. Christ’s death is the center around which Paul’s theology revolves. The role of Jesus Christ’s death in the book of Romans is, more narrowly defined, one of sacrifice and reconciliation. This can be seen by first looking at three passages: Romans 3:21-26; Romans 5:1-11; and Romans 8:31-39.

The meaning of Christ’s death in these passages can be addressed through looking at two distinct areas of the passages: whom Christ’s death applies to, and how it is described. This is further complicated by the fact that these two areas are interconnected in the passage. This interconnection leads to the theology of atonement.

Chapter Two

Ransom

One of the earliest theories of the atonement was the Ransom theory. As it is described by Andrew Sung Park, “This atonement theory upholds the idea that Satan has control over humanity. God paid a ransom to Satan and released humanity from Satan's grip. This theory dominated the church from its early days until the development of Anselm’s satisfaction theory. A number of scholars raise the question about the rights of Satan over humanity. What do we owe Satan? Some early church fathers believed that sin had human beings subjected under the dominion of Satan.”

For the most part, the ransom theory of the atonement draws from four New Testament passages: Matt. 20:27-28, Mark 10:45, 1 Cor. 6:20, and 1 Tim. 2:5-6.

One of the early proponents of the ransom theory for the atonement was Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c. 395), 4th century theologian and one of the Cappadocian Fathers. In Chapters 21 through 24 of his apologetic work The Great Catechism, Gregory lays out his theology of the atonement, beginning with how God views humanity: "As good, then, the Deity entertains pity for fallen man; as wise He is not ignorant of the means for his


32 Park, Triune Atonement, 3; Matt. 20:27-28: “…and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many;” Mark 10:45: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many;” 1 Cor. 6:20: “For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body;” 1 Tim. 2:5-6: “For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all—this was attested at the right time.”

recovery; while a just decision must also form part of that wisdom; for no one would
ascribe that genuine justice to the absence of wisdom.”

This fallen nature of humanity can be further explained by Lucas F. Mateo-Seco in his article "La teología de la muerte en la ‘Oratio catechetica magna’ de San Gregorio de Nisa,”

It is clear in the text that we have been discussing that death is introduced by the enemy of man after the misadventure of Paradise, not in the sense that the demon possessing human destiny, has established its term as lord, but in the sense of that opened to men the way that would lead them to surrender to death. God always owner of human destiny, bring humanity to the primitive order established but ‘diverting’ the road not prevent the consequences that inevitably had followed the ‘suicide’ of man. There was no death before the sin our first parents were created in the image of God, sharing in their attributes, even of eternity, who was translating for them immortality.

For Mateo-Seco, it is death that is the enemy, as there was no death before the misadventure in the garden. After God’s pity for humanity is known, Gregory then explains the state of humanity:

For as they who have bartered away their freedom for money are the slaves of those who have purchased them…on the same principle, now that we had


35 Lucas F. Mateo-Seco, "La teología de la muerte en la ‘Oratio catechetica magna’ de San Gregorio de Nisa," Scripta Theologica 1, no. 2 (July 1, 1969): 461. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed February 27, 2014). Original Text: “En el texto que venimos comentando queda claro que la muerte es introducida por el enemigo del hombre tras la desventura del Paraíso, no en el sentido de que el demonio, poseyendo el destino humano, haya establecido su término como señor, sino en el sentido de que abrió a los hombres el camino que les llevaría a entregarse a la muerte. Dios, siempre dueño del destino humano, llevará a la humanidad al primitivo fin establecido, pero ‘diviando’ el camino por no impedir las consecuencias que inevitablemente habían de seguirse del "suicidio" del hombre. La muerte no existía antes del pecado en nuestros primeros padres, creados a imagen de Dios, participando de sus atributos, incluso de la eternidad, que en ellos se traducía por inmortalidad.” Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Spanish are by Kaeleigh Post.
voluntarily bartered away our freedom, it was requisite that no arbitrary method of recovery, but the one consonant with justice should be devised by Him Who in His goodness had undertaken our rescue. Now this method is in a measure this; to make over to the master of the slave whatever ransom he may agree to accept for the person in his possession.\footnote{Gregory of Nyssa \textit{The Great Catechism} Ch. 22.}

For Gregory, the fall has placed humanity in a similar space as a person who has sold him or her self into slavery. The slavery that Gregory is speaking of differs from the slavery common in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries in the western hemisphere—which involved first forcing native populations into forced labor, then kidnapping people from Africa to be set to forced labor for life. Rather, there were five distinct sources of slaves in the Roman Empire:

The first and most important were enemies captured in warfare…This also meant that slaves represented something of a cross section of Mediterranean society. The other four sources of slavery were equally indiscriminate, as far as racial stereotypes were concerned. The steadiest supply came from the offspring of slaves. There were also persons who voluntarily sold themselves into slavery for economic reasons; persons who fell into debt and lost their freedom; and certain classes or criminals whose punishment was enslavement.\footnote{Jewett, \textit{Romans}, 51-52.}

This complex system also contained a legal system that gave rights to slaves including equal standing in court with a freeman/woman, and manumission after a certain number of years.\footnote{Jewett, \textit{Romans}, 52.} Because of this wide diversity, it allows for all of humanity to be able to put themselves in this position.

Gregory addresses the issue of the ransom, asking:

\ldots what would he [Satan] accept in exchange for the thing which he held, but something, to be sure, higher and better, in the way of ransom, that thus, by receiving a gain in the exchange, he might foster the more his own special passion
of pride? Now unquestionably in not one of those who had lived in history from the beginning of the world had he been conscious of any such circumstance as he observed to surround Him Who then manifested Himself, i.e. conception without carnal connection, birth without impurity, motherhood with virginity, voices of the unseen testifying from above to a transcendent worth, the healing of natural disease, without the use of means and of an extraordinary character, proceeding from Him by the mere utterance of a word and exercise of His will, the restoration of the dead to life, the absolution of the damned, the fear with which He inspired devils, His power over tempests...  

What could be worth a ransom for all of humanity—past, present, or future? In Gregory’s thought, the only thing worth that innumerable amount would something one-of-a-kind—something unattainable—Jesus Christ, who was born without the taint of sin who can do anything that is possible to do and then some. How could Satan not leap at the chance to get a unique item for his “collection,” someone who would guarantee Satan ultimate bragging rights? Gregory continues,

The Enemy, therefore, beholding in Him such power, saw also in Him an opportunity for an advance, in the exchange, upon the value of what he held. For this reason he chooses Him as a ransom for those who were shut up in the prison of death. But it was out of his power to look on the unclouded aspect of God; he must see in Him some portion of that fleshly nature which through sin he had so long held in bondage. Therefore it was that the Deity was invested with the flesh, in order, that is, to secure that he, by looking upon something congenial and kindred to himself, might have no fears in approaching that supereminent power; and might yet by perceiving that power, showing as it did, yet only gradually, more and more splendour [sic] in the miracles, deem what was seen an object of desire rather than of fear... His making the redemption of the captive a matter of exchange exhibits His justice, while the invention whereby He enabled the Enemy to apprehend that of which he was before incapable, is a manifestation of supreme wisdom.

It is here that Gregory explains why Jesus took on flesh. Jesus took on flesh because, just like humanity, Satan was not able to look at “the unclouded aspect of God.” Gregory also

39 Gregory of Nyssa *The Great Catechism* Ch. 23.

40 Gregory of Nyssa *The Great Catechism* Ch. 23.
asserts that, clothed in a human body, Jesus looked un-assuming, yet still has enough of his power visible to make him look worthy being the ransom for all of humanity for all time. It is here that just where Gregory is going with his theory can be seen:

…in order to secure 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, and thus, life being introduced into the house of death, and light shining in darkness, that which is diametrically opposed to light and life might vanish; for it is not in the nature of darkness to remain when light is present, or of death to exist when life is active.\(^41\)

It is finally here that the reasoning behind the ransom theory becomes clear: it is not God actually giving up his Son to the devil. Rather, it is a massive metaphorical “sting operation.” In a sense, Jesus goes undercover, making it look as though he is playing by the rules established by Satan. Only, after he has entered the negations, he switches the rules, rescues the hostages—in this case, humanity—and defeats the villain, Satan.

Gregory also has an argument against those who claim Jesus becoming human reduced God’s power: “But this His descent to the humility of man is a kind of superabundant exercise of power, which thus finds no check even in directions which contravene nature.”\(^42\) For Gregory, it is the exact opposite—God shows God’s power by taking on a form that lacks power. One the most powerful could accomplish this. Mateo-Seco argues: “It is evident that for Nyssa that there is a double way to signal that the death of Christ. It is conceivable that Christ died because we also wanted to resemble the dead, or rather it is conceivable that dying is not only a characteristic of human nature

\(^{41}\) Gregory of Nyssa *The Great Catechism* Ch. 24.

\(^{42}\) Gregory of Nyssa *The Great Catechism* Ch. 24.
more accepted by Christ, but the deeper reason for the Incarnation of the Word.”

Regardless, of the exact view, Christ becoming human does not weaken him.

Park summarizes Gregory’s understanding of atonement as, “This theory pictures God as a fisher hooking the devil with the bait of Jesus’ human body. The devil’s power of death was destroyed by Christ’s divinity, and we were saved by life. The lack of life makes death active, and the life of Christ defeated the death power of the devil.” Christ’s tricking Satan into accepting him as a ransom allowed for the ultimate live of Christ’s divinity to free humanity from its bondage.

A more modern view of the theory or ransom can be found in Darby Kathleen Ray’s book, *Deceiving the Devil*. Ray looks at the theory of ransom atonement through the lens of Latin American liberation theology. Rather than centering her view of the theory of ransom in the “Jesus as bait” understanding, she instead uses the image of Jesus as liberator. She begins this by looking at the understanding and role of sin: “Traditional Christian theology’s tendency to define salvation as freedom from personal sin and guilt is criticized as too narrow a scope….By contrast, liberation theologies propose that to broaden the scope of salvation to include not merely the individual but the social as well, we need to think in terms of liberation.” This broadening of the scope with regards to

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43 Mateo-Seco, “La teologia de la muerte,” 466. Original Text: “Manifiesta el Niseno que existe un doble camino para señalar el por qué de la muerte de Cristo. Puede concebirse que Cristo muere porque quiso asemejarse a nosotros también en el morir, o puede concebirse más bien que el morir no es sólo una característica más de la naturaleza humana aceptada por Cristo, sino la razón profunda de la Encarnación del Verbo.” Translation from Spanish by Kaeleigh Post.


sin allows for both a shift in how sin is thought about, and a shift in how sin needs to be handled in the atoning process.

Ray continues, “In addition, they suggest that since the focus has been for so long on the individual alone—to the great detriment of millions of people enslaved not only by personal sin and guilt but also, and perhaps primarily, by social, political, and economic systems—the emphasis how should be on the social….Thus, salvation is understood in terms of liberation, and sin is understood to include not simply the personal but structural.”\footnote{Ray, \textit{Deceiving the Devil}, 85.} This shift to include social sin—which could, and probably should be viewed as structural sin—is very important. By acknowledging and including structural sin, it brings to the fore the sins that are not often remembered—ones that include structural racism, sexism, and other forms of imbedded oppression.

Ray then connects this broader concept of sin to the theory of ransom with regards to atonement: “Because sin is ‘enslaving,’ because it captures both oppressor and oppressed in cycles of victimization that become self-perpetuating, ‘its defeat is formally liberation’—freedom from slavery.”\footnote{Ray, \textit{Deceiving the Devil}, 86; Jon Sorbino, \textit{The Principle of Mercy} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 4, 9.} For Ray, even if humans individually attempt to live as blameless a life as is humanly possible, humanity is still a slave to sin—in this case structural sin that cannot be escaped. Rather than Jesus acting as bait to lure Satan into what will end up being Satan’s defeat, instead Jesus acts in a distinctly different way: “Liberation theologies demonstrate that when the actual historical mission of Jesus is taken seriously, a theology of glory becomes impossible. Jesus is neither the Conquering
Christ nor the Conquered Christ but the One who liberates through resistance to evil and compassion with the suffering."\(^{48}\) Rather than being the “sting operation” of Gregory of Nyssa, for Ray, Christ’s work is more akin to a resistance movement, where the ransom comes less from trickery and more from wearing down and fatiguing the enemy to the point of giving up, all the while being compassionate to the captives.

For Ray, atonement and Christ’s death are not directly tied together. Atonement comes from Jesus resistance to sin and compassion for the suffering. Jesus’ death, on the other hand,

…was the consequence of the life he lived, not the result of a death wish, of some cosmic deal between God and Satan, or of God’s demand for bloody satisfaction. Atonement—God’s confrontation of evil and reconciliation of the world to the Divine Self—cannot be narrowed to the moment of Jesus’ death or even to the passion, for it is a process that includes life, death and resurrection. And yet, liberation theologians insist that we cannot overlook the redemptive significance of Jesus’ suffering and death, for it here that God is revealed in an unexpected and scandalous way.\(^{48}\)

Despite not having a direct link to Jesus’ death, and instead having as a main focus Jesus’ work in the world, even in Ray’s version of the ransom theory Jesus’ death is of great importance. This understanding of Jesus’ death—one caused by the manner of his life—can be seen to draw off the moral exemplar theory of the atonement, which will be looked at later.

\(^{48}\) Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 87.

\(^{49}\) Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 87.
Chapter Three

Anselm’s Substitutionary Atonement

Throughout the centuries, one particular description of the atonement came to the forefront of theology in much, if not all, of Western Christianity: substitutionary atonement in its various forms. Substitutionary atonement came to play such a great role in Western Christianity because of the wider culture surrounding Western Christianity at the time:

Whereas the Hellenistic culture in which the Eastern Fathers had been educated was noted particularly for its development in the area of philosophy and abstract thought, since the rise of the Roman Empire the Latin-speaking West had been characterized by its strong interest and experience in administrative and legal matters. It is therefore not surprising that Anselm, like other Western theologians both before and after him, made much greater use of justice or legal categories and terminology to speak of salvation.50

This divide between the East and West—present from the earliest days of Christianity—was made all the more obvious with the various sackings of Rome in the late fourth and early and mid-fifth centuries, and continued to expand, ending in

All these various forms can be traced back to Anselm’s (1033-1109) substitutionary atonement as established in Cur Deus Homo. This, thus, has become the predominant theory for Western Christianity. As Douglas John Hall writes, “Western Christendom in both its Roman Catholic and its major Protestant expressions has been welded to an atonement theology that has guaranteed keeping God the Father quite distinct from the suffering Son. For in the Latin or Anselmic or satisfaction theory that the West adopted in various forms almost without exception, the suffering of the Son is

50 David A. Brondos, Fortress Introduction to Salvation and the Cross (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 76.
virtually at the hands of the Father, who requires satisfaction for the guilt and unholiness
of the human race, for which the Christ substitutes himself."

Anselm was an eleventh century monastic and bishop of Canterbury who lived in
a rapidly changing world. While he was writing *Cur Deus Homo*, he was living in a
country that, within his lifetime had undergone a major invasion and change in ruling
dynasty with the Battle of Hastings (October 14, 1066) and the beginning of Norman
rule.

In *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm lays out a theory of atonement that centers on the
concept of the honor of God. In his theory, the mere existence of humanity’s sin
dishonors God—which cannot and should not happen. This dishonor is so great that no
human can erase the dishonor—for if a human was powerful enough to erase the
dishonor, in Anselm’s logic, then that human would need to be the agent of some other
great power outside God. And, for Anselm, God cannot just forgive the sin, because
"if…sin is neither paid for no punished, it is subject to no law…therefore, sinfulness is in
a position of greater freedom, if it is forgiven though mercy alone, than righteousness—
and this seems extremely unfitting. And the incongruity extends even further: it makes
sinfulness resemble God. For, just as God is subject to no law, the same is the case with

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51 Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*
(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 88.


sinfulness.” For Anselm, this resemblance of sinfulness and God cannot exist because God and sin are antithetical and sin is an affront to God’s honor. Since this resemblance is caused by sin not being punished, then a punishment must happen.

The only way in which God’s honor can be restored is if God Godself, in the form of the God-man Jesus, dies to restore God’s honor. It must be the God-man, because only someone without sin restore God’s honor by removing the affront that was humanity’s sin. As Peter Schmiechen states, “…Anselm rejected earlier forms of argumentation (such as the ransom theory) in search of a new rational for the incarnation. An elaborate argument was developed to show how the incarnation is required to restore the purposes of God.” This understanding of God’s honor and how it must be redeemed was what both Abelard and Aulén argued against in their atonement theories.

Throughout history, Anselm’s substitutionary theory of atonement has been adapted by numerous theologians. One of the prominent adaptations is its transformation into penal substitutionary atonement, though the theory of penal substitutionary atonement has faced a great deal of criticism. In his book, Schmiechen uses as an example the systematic theology of nineteenth century theologian Charles Hodge. Hodge argues that Jesus’ death should not be understood as a struggle between good and evil,

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54 Anselm of Canterbury *Cur Deus Homo* I.12, 284.

55 Anselm of Canterbury *Cur Deus Homo* II.6, 319-320.


57 Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 104n.
but rather as a stand-in for the death of humanity.\textsuperscript{58} He also refutes the argument from John Dun Scotus (1265-1308), stating that Christ’s death was not necessary, but rather voluntary:

For Hodge, this [denying the necessity of Christ’s death] is unthinkable, plunging the whole passion story into arbitrariness. Against such a view, Hodge argues that Jesus’ death was required….There can be no pardon except ‘on the ground of a forensic penal substitution. Therefore the Apostle says (Romans iii.25), that God sent for Christ as a propitiation through faith in his blood, in order that God might be just in justifying the ungodly…’\textsuperscript{59}

While penal substitutionary atonement has had many proponents, including Charles Hodge, and is part of the greater cultural ethos, there are issues: “The theory has been criticized as representing the very antithesis of the good news. The two issues discussed in the analysis of sacrifice (Chapter One) go to the heart of the issue: one is the passivity of God, entailed in the idea that God is in need of propitiation or appeasement; the second is the isolation of the death of Jesus as an end in itself.”\textsuperscript{60} These two issues will be examined later.

Another adaptation of substitutionary atonement came at the hands of Karl Barth. Ray argues:

Thanks to the brilliance of Karl Barth in the twentieth century, the Anselmian model of atonement was infused with new vitality. Although he uses contemporary language and categories, Barth’s understanding of atonement shares many of the hallmarks of the Anselmian model, particularly its emphasis on the objective nature of sin, the universality of human culpability, the wrath of God, the costliness of redemption, and the substitutionary character of Jesus’ death.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{58} Schmichen, \textit{Saving Power}, 107.

\textsuperscript{59} Schmeichen, \textit{Saving Power}, 107.

\textsuperscript{60} Schmeichen, \textit{Saving Power}, 109.

\textsuperscript{61} Ray, \textit{Deceiving the Devil}, 12.
Part of what helped revitalize the Anselmian model was the contextualization provided by Barth’s more contemporary language. To a twentieth century society, framing atonement in the language of an honor-shame society does not make sense—the world of Europe and North America did not function in this way. Barth’s change of language allowed for better understanding of Anselm’s atonement theory in the modern era by contextualizing the theory for the world around him:

In a departure from the Anselmian model, Barth does not view the death of Christ in terms of satisfaction or transaction because his focus is at all times on atonement as encounter with the living Christ who is simultaneously transcendent and personal. Atonement is, in one sense, a once-and-for-all event, utterly transcendent and beyond human manipulation—not the inevitable working out of a historically immanent impulse…

This contextualization extended to the overall ethos of Barth’s theology: “For Barth, whose theology was in large part a reaction to the political events surrounding the two World Wars that took place during his life, sinful humanity had to be humbled and destroyed before it might be saved. Salvation, therefore, could not originate in human beings or result from human activity; it could only be the work of a sovereign, almighty God who transcends human history as the ‘wholly other.’” The utter depravity present in the two world wars for Barth, among other theologians, enforced the understanding that humanity that humanity cannot, in any way, shape, or form have any hand in saving itself. For Barth, it is only through the power of the wholly-other God that salvation can occur.

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62 Ray, Deceiving the Devil, 12.

63 Brondos, Salvation and the Cross, 130.
Barth begins his look at atonement by looking at Christ’s work: “The fact that this being destroyed and done away and replaced came on Him in our place—and in Him as our Substitute of us—is something which because it happened one and for all never ceases to be true for him and therefore for us. By suffering death—for us, He did for us that which is the basis of our life from death. Therefore we cannot be the ones for whom He has done this without being the ones for whom He has suffered.”64 For Barth, our salvation through Christ and Christ’s suffering are intrinsically interconnected and it is impossible to separate the two. As in Anselm, Barth’s role for Christ is as substitute for humanity—once and for all. Barth continues, “What we have to say here is that in the same judgment in which God accuses and condemns us as sinners and gives us up to death, He pardons us and places us in a new life before Him and with Him.”65

Rather than framing the reason for Christ taking our place in the substitution in terms of a slight against God’s honor needing to be satisfied, instead Barth frames Christ’s act of substitution in terms of the righteousness and reconciling grace of God: “The task of the doctrine of justification is to demonstrate the righteousness of God which overrules in the reconciling grace of God, and the grace of God which truly and actually overrules the righteousness of God. It is the task of finding a reliable answer to the question: What is God for sinful man? and what is sinful man before the god who is for him? The basis of the community and the certainty of faith stands or falls with the


65 Barth, Doctrine of Reconciliation, 516.
answer to this question.”\textsuperscript{66} This focus on righteousness, rather than a slight against God’s honor, allows for a more positive spin on the substitutionary atonement theory.

Our God is a grace-full, reconciling God who created humanity to be in covenant with God. But humanity’s sin after the fall skewed this: “By sin man puts himself in the wrong relation to God. He makes himself impossible as the creature and covenant-partner of God. He desecrates the good nature which he has been given and forfeits the grace which is addressed to him. He compromises his existence. For he has no right as sinner. His is only in the wrong.”\textsuperscript{67} Despite this total lack of rights, for Barth this is not the end. Because God is a grace-full and righteous God, even though humanity has forfeited the grace given to it, humanity still has a shot: “This is the right of God which is maintained in the justification of sinful man, which marks it off even as a free act of grace from the caprice and arbitrariness of a destiny that apportions blindfold its favour and disfavour, which clothes it with majesty and dignity, which gives to the knowledge of faith an infallible certainty—that in the first instance God affirms Himself in this action, that in it He lives His own divine life in His unity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”\textsuperscript{68} For Barth, it is through the justification of humanity that God lives the perichoretic union of the Trinity.

Barth also argues, “It is not at the expense but in the exercise of his Godhead that for the sake of all flesh His Word becomes flesh (Jn. 1\textsuperscript{14}) [sic]. It is not denial but a confirmation of His Godhead that He causes his Holy Spirit to dwell and work as the

\textsuperscript{66} Barth, \textit{Doctrine of Reconciliation}, 518.

\textsuperscript{67} Barth, \textit{Doctrine of Reconciliation}, 528.

\textsuperscript{68} Barth, \textit{Doctrine of Reconciliation}, 532.
witness of His grace in those who are still threatened by sin and the flesh and death.”

The grace-full and righteous God shows these qualities to humanity by sending Godself, in the form of Christ Jesus, to humanity.

The major issue with sin is that “[m]an’s wrong cannot be merely his own affair. It takes place in his relationship with God. In essence it is directed against God. It contradicts and proposes His right. Because of this it demands the judgment which is the application of His right and the exercise of His righteousness. It has fallen victim to its execution. Because God is in the right against it in these two ways, the wrong of man cannot be maintained or tolerated.” For Barth, any action of humanity that negatively affects the relationship between God and humanity is a sin—and something that needs to end.

For Barth, the atonement consists of a moment—and in this moment, humanity is both condemned and saved at the same time—both saint and sinner. Barth elaborates on this, stating, “To put it another way, on the left hand man is the one who because of His [sic] wrong condemned and rejected and abandoned by God, and on the right hand he is the same man as the one who even in his condemnation and rejection and abandonment is till pardoned and maintained by God, being kept for the fulfilment of His will and plan.” This saint-sinner dichotomy shows just how grace-full God is—humanity has rejected God, and God still saves it, allowing for humanity to be kept for the fulfillment of God’s will and plans.

69 Barth, Doctrine of Reconciliation, 532.

70 Barth, Doctrine of Reconciliation, 535.

71 Barth, Doctrine of Reconciliation, 541.
Barth sums up his view of the atonement, saying “Three things are clear. This pardon (1) can only be God’s sentence on man….But this pardon (2) can be received and taken to heart and put into effect by him only as the sentence of God on him and as the Word of God’s revelation addressed to him….But if our pardon is God’s sentence and the content of His Word to us, then (3) it has an authority and force and validity which are not partial but total, not relative but absolute.” God’s pardon is the only sentence our grace-full and righteous God can provide, though this pardon is only for those who believe in Christ. But, Barth reminds us, it is an absolute pardon for a crime that we could never do the time for.

Paul Dafydd Jones sums up Barth’s understanding of atonement especially well when he writes,

As the nails are forced into his receptive flesh, in the moment at which he ‘welcomes’ sin into his being, Christ has actually become the sin that God rejects (thus 2 Cor. 5:21). And God does reject this sin. “[T]he wrong [of the fallen human] has actually to be purged and consumed – a whole burnt offering in the flame of which both he and his sin are burnt up, disappearing in the smoke and the savour, and ceasing to be’. This entails more than Christ ‘taking the negativities of existence into unbroken unity with God’. It entails Christ being the person in whom the horror of sinful hostility against God is halted, cancelled and rendered quite impossible.

For Barth, the reason that Jesus becomes human was so that he could—literally—become sin, and because sin is the antithesis of God, the joining of God the Son and sin destroys sin for all time.

72 Barth, Doctrine of Reconciliation, 570.

Another variation of Anselm’s theory can be found in Gerhard Ludwig Müller’s article "Jesucristo, el designio salvador del Padre":

Also, in the earliest post-Easter symbols suggest the character of the death of Jesus. He did not pass away, nor was he convicted. Rather he gave his life "for our sins according to the scriptures" (1 Cor 15, 3). Making a clear reference to the servant of God ('Ebed Yahweh', cf. Isaiah 53, 4.12), Paul interprets the death of Jesus as the eschatological revelation of his being-for-us. Through this Basileia [kingdom] and reveals the righteousness of God, that is, that God himself is addressed to man as their Savior. “For our faults he was handed over, by our justification he was raised” (Rom 4, 25). The reason for our hope, which consists of no power of the world can separate us from God is that God is for us (Rom 8, 31). This existence of God for us is his love that is present in Christ Jesus (Rom 8, 39).

Rather than offering a complex discussion of God’s honor (or righteousness), Müller focuses more on the various biblical texts supporting a substitutionary theory. For Müller, Christ acts as a substitution for humanity because of God’s love for humanity. Müller also argues:

This basic relationship of Jesus with God, which exclusively determines his whole being, his performance and his destiny, the connection and the end of the unsurpassed understanding of the very revelation of the Old Testament is also obvious. In the Old Testament, the mediator of prophetic revelation was involved with his own existence in the event of revelation. But at no moment will he reach the absolute match the content of Revelation with the mediator of it. What is novel about Jesus is that the mediator of the revelation not only keeps a

74 Gerhard Ludwig Müller, "Jesucristo, el designio salvador del Padre." Scripta Theologica 31, no. 3 (September 1, 1999): 720-721. Original Text: “También en los más primitivos símbolos post-pascuales se indica el carácter de entrega que tuvo la muerte de Jesús. No murió ni fue condenado, sin más. Más bien dio su vida «por nuestros pecados, según las escrituras» (1 Co 15, 3). Haciendo una clara referencia al siervo de Dios («Ebed Yahvé», cf. Is 53, 4.12), Pablo interpreta la muerte de Jesús como la revelación eschatológica de su ser-para-nosotros. A través de esto se revela la Basileia y la justicia de Dios, es decir, el que Dios mismo se dirija al hombre como su Salvador. «Por nuestras faltas fue entregado, por nuestra justificación fue resucitado» (Rm 4, 25). La razón de nuestra esperanza, que consiste en que ningún poder del mundo nos puede separar de Dios, se encuentra en que Dios es para nosotros (Rm 8, 31). Esta existencia de Dios para nosotros es su amor, que se hace presente en Cristo Jesús (Rm 8, 39).” Translation from Spanish by Kaeleigh Post.
relationship with God as an envoy. Beyond this, the place where is personally manifest in a progressive manner the identity of the reveled word, part of the being of God, and his appearance in the history of revelation. So there exists an identity between the messianic ministry of the Son of God and the essential unity of the Word or the Son with the Father.\textsuperscript{75}

Christ acts as a mediator because of the love God has for humanity by coming as a revelation—the Word. For Müller, Christ’s coming as the Word allows for an additional level of relationship between God the Father and God the Son.

\textsuperscript{75} Müller, “Jesucristo,” 727. Original Text: “En esta relación básica de Jesús con Dios, que exclusivamente determina todo su ser, su actuación y su destino, se manifiesta también la conexión y el término insuperable de la comprensión de la Revelación propia del Antiguo Testamento. Ya en el Antiguo Testamento, el mediador de la revelación profética quedaba involucrado con su propia existencia en los sucesos de la revelación. Pero en ningún momento se llega a la coincidencia absoluta del contenido de la Revelación con el mediador de la misma. Lo novedoso de Jesús es que el mediador de la Revelación no sólo guarda para con Dios una relación de enviado. Por encima de ello, es personalmente el lugar donde se manifiesta de manera progresiva la identidad entre la Palabra revelada, perteneciente al ser de Dios, y su aparición en la historia de la Revelación. Por eso existe una identidad entre el ministerio del Hijo de Dios mesiánico y la unidad esencial de la Palabra o del Hijo con el Padre.” Translated from Spanish by Kaeleigh Post.
Chapter Four

Why a Nonviolent Atonement?

Why does the Anselm’s model of the atonement hold such popularity? In his book *Love, Violence, and the Cross*, Gregory Anderson Love argues, “The theory of atonement with which most Christians in North America are familiar is one that answers two cravings of the human heart: A longing for justice upon perpetrators of violence, and ironically, a plea for mercy—that our sins of violence and omission can somehow be forgiven.”76 Because of its intimate connection to humanity’s baser emotions, Anselm’s model intrinsically makes sense. It allows for the crime to be punished, while at the same time, it allows us individually to be granted mercy, despite the fact that we, in fact are the criminal. But this connection can end up as more of a psychologically harmful effect than a positive one. To start with, the emotional cravings that Anselm’s theory answers can go against the second greatest commandment: “The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”77 If humanity favors too much one or the other “craving of the heart,” then it can easily too far.

Anselm’s theory can play off humanity’s desires for mercy in the face of our own violent acts while simultaneously wishing for “justice” against others violence, and, in the end, bring about or justify violence. This connection to violence has been has been addressed by many theologians including Flora Keshgegian. Keshgegian states that,


77 Mark 12:31.
Recently, feminist theologians have turned their attention both to Anselm’s argument and to the influence of his atonement theory. Setting his work within a wider critique of Christian theology and atonement theory, these feminist theologians, such as Joanne Carlson Brown, Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock, argue that Anselm’s theology is especially problematic because it is responsible for what has been deemed an ‘abusive’ theology of atonement.\(^78\)

These theologians, from a variety of theological backgrounds, all have different understandings of the role of this violence. One understanding of this violence that has gained traction, especially with Keshgegian, can be seen in the theology of Rita Nakashima Brock:

For example, Rita Nakashima Brock argues that traditional theologies of the cross breed paternalistic dependence and are a form of cosmic child abuse: ‘The father allows, or even inflicts, the death of his only perfect son. The emphasis is on the goodness and power of the father and the unworthiness and powerlessness of his children, so that the father’s punishment is just and children are to blame.’ She further suggests: ‘The shadow of omnipotence haunts atonement. The ghost of the primitive father lurks in the corners.’\(^79\)

For Brock, it is the power differential that causes the violence to be abusive. This understanding of the violent nature of atonement is common to many theologians. Keshgegian elaborates, “Abuse, as has been argued by feminist theologians and counselors, is an act of power. It is a misuse of power to render another person harmed and powerless. Whether we are considering cases of domestic violence or sexual misconduct, terrorism or persecution, power is used against others who are denied power and so victimized.”\(^80\)

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\(^78\) Keshgegian, “The Scandal of the Cross,” 475.


\(^80\) Keshgegian, “The Scandal of the Cross,” 478.
The substitutionary atonement model, especially in its penal substitution adaptation, can cause a number of issues for some Christians. For these Christians, this model of the atonement contains a concept of the suffering of Christ, whom they view as suffering at the hands of God the Father, as a substitution for our sins: “A further question of contention raised by some feminists is the claim implied by traditional understandings of atonement that Jesus’ suffering was the outgrowth of his obedience to his Father’s will. Such a theology, it is argued, constitutes ‘divine child abuse’ insofar as God the Father is thought to require the suffering and death of his beloved child to compensate for the lack of respect/honor/obeisance he (God) receives from others (humanity); and Jesus, like a typical child victim for whom love is identified with obedience to the adult’s authority, obliges.”81 In this argument, what is being questioned, in some ways, is the agency of Christ. For the feminist theologians, the question is “Does Christ have a say in his death?” For many feminist theologians, the answer to this question is no, Christ does not have a say in his death. Keshgegian elaborates further on this when she writes: “The specific criticism I would focus on here is the charge that Anselm's God is a tyrant who demands the death of an innocent victim in order to get what is due ‘him’ and to meet the demands of ‘his’ justice, which is opposed to mercy.”82

While this argument shows the strong emotions attached to Anselm’s theory, it does not match what Anselm writes: “God, therefore, did not force Christ to die, there being no sin in him. Rather, he underwent death of his own accord, not out of an obedience consisting in the abandonment of his life, but out of an obedience consisting in

81 Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 62.

82 Keshgegian, “The Scandal of the Cross,” 481.
his upholding of righteousness so bravely and pertinaciously that as a result he incurred death.”

For Anselm, God is not demanding Christ’s death; instead Christ is dying, of his free will, to uphold God’s righteousness. Yet the popular and prevalent adaptions of Anselm’s views—even if they don’t precisely match Anselm’s stated theology—can be problematic for modern interpreters.

This concept of Jesus’ suffering for us—allowing for mercy on our own behalf—and it being held up as a model that humanity—and especially women—ought to follow—can be a very dangerous and damaging model. In *Proverbs of Ashes*, Rebecca Ann Parker speaks of a conversation she had with a woman seeking advice about how to deal with spousal abuse: “‘The priest said I should rejoice in my sufferings because they bring me closer to Jesus. He said, ‘Jesus suffered because he loved us.’ He said, ‘If you love Jesus, accept the beatings and bear them gladly, as Jesus bore the cross.’”

This is also brought to light in Nancy Bedford’s article “Hacia una cristología saludable para mujeres pertinaces: la doctrina de la expiación bajo la lupa de la crítica feminista” (“Towards a Healthy Christology for Stubborn Women: The Doctrine of the Atonement under the Microscope of Feminist Criticism”) in which she writes,

She grew up as a pastor’s daughter, with parents who loved her deeply. Nevertheless, when she was four years old she was sexually abused for many months by a neighbor, she learned in many direct and indirect ways that she ought to "load" [or bear] suffering, like her father/pastor and like Jesus. While her parents were not able to detect them what was happening to her and her little brother at the time, the models of Christian life around her, hymns and teachings of the Church’s life, reinforced the imperative to suffer and bear in silence with

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83 Anselm *Cur Deus Homo* I.9, 277.

the pain. The consequences of that abuse cannot be erased.  

This concept of being “imitators of Christ” can be connected to more than just the concept of suffering: “As we will see, many key elements of traditional construals of atonement—including certain interpretations of love, fidelity, honor, power, justice, obedience, punishment, suffering, and sacrifice—can and do lead to the theological sanctioning of sexual and domestic abuse.” The shifting of these traditional symbols of our freedom from death and sin through the atonement to symbols of oppression, abuse, and “sanctioning” of oppression and abuse can act as a very strong trigger. Ray continues:

From a theological perspective, the reality of sexual and domestic violence represents a horrible abuse of power, a corruption of the Christian ideals of love and justice, a perversion of right relationship between victim, offender, and community and, perhaps most important, a destruction of the victim’s believe in the fundamental blessedness and trustworthiness of the world, of other people, and even of herself. The Christian church has been painstakingly slow to recognize and denounce these types of violence as evil.

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85 Nancy Elizabeth Bedford, "Hacia una cristología saludable para mujeres pertinaces: la doctrina de la expiación bajo la lupa de la crítica feminista." *Cuadernos De Teología* 22, (January 1, 2003): 116-117. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 17, 2014); Original Text: “Se creó como hija de pastor, con padres que la amaban profundamente. Sin embargo, cuando a los cuatro años fue abusada sexualmente durante muchos meses por un vecino, aprendió de muchas maneras directas e indirectas que debía "cargar" con su sufrimiento, como hacía su padre/pastor y como hacía Jesús. A la vez que sus padres no eran capaces de detectar lo que les estaba pasando a ella y a su hermanito menor, los modelos de vida cristiana que la rodeaban, los himnos y las enseñanzas de la vida eclesial reforzaban el imperativo de sufrir y cargar en silencio con el dolor. Las secuelas de ese abuso no pueden ser borradas.” Translated from Spanish by Kaeleigh Post.

86 Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 3.

87 Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 3.
If this were not enough, “For feminist theologians, the centrality of atonement language and imagery in patriarchal theologies, which militate against the full personhood of women, children, and disenfranchised men, and which, more specifically, appear to contribute to sexual and domestic violence, requires a reevaluation not only of atonement but also of Christianity itself.”88 This is not just a problem for women, but for large swaths of humanity.

For feminists there are solutions. One can be seen in Bedford:

That said, I would not turn a deaf ear to the warnings of those women that I point out that this runs an ongoing position to be co-opted and manipulated by patriarchy as a common sense risk. If the testimony and persistent resistance of the two women who we know as ministrae ancillae [handmaidens of ministry] and together with them the great cloud of witnesses women through the centuries of falling into nonsense and absurdity, theology does not have as one of its most important challenges and lifelong creatively to ensure that christology is healthy and not harmful: that is, to be pneumatica [mentally].89

Allowing for more listening can help reduce any inadvertent violence, but is not a solution for violence due to specific language that is consciously used. Because of these issues, whether with the actual theory or the cultural perceptions of said theory, various theologians throughout history have developed alternative “nonviolent” atonement theories, ones that did not center on Christ’s death acting as a substitution on the behalf

88 Ray, Deceiving the Devil, 3.

89 Bedford, "Hacia una cristología,” 121. Original Text: “Dicho esto, no quisiera hacer oídos sordos a las advertencias de aquellas mujeres que me señalan que tal posición corre un riesgo permanente a ser cooptado e instrumentalizado por el sentido común patriarcal. Si el testimonio y la resistencia de las dos mujeres pertinaces que conocemos como ancillae ministrae y junto con ellas la gran nube de testigos mujeres a través de los siglos no ha de caer en el sin-sentido y el absurdo, la teología tiene como uno de sus desafíos más importantes el velar permanente y creativamente para que la cristología sea saludable y no sea nociva: es decir, para que sea pneumática.” Translated from Spanish by Kaeleigh Post.
of humanity. Two of the main nonviolent atonement theories are the Moral Exemplar theory first proposed by Abelard; and the Christus Victor theory as revived by Gustaf Aulén.
Chapter Five

Abelard

Peter Abelard (1079-1142) lived about a generation after Anselm and was one of Anselm’s first critics. Abelard’s atonement theory can be found neatly laid out in his *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, specifically his section covering Romans 3:19-26. In his atonement theory, “[Abelard’s] writing is like a thunderbolt directed at two positions. The first is the ransom theory…Abelard now turns his criticism to any transactional view that relies on payments to retributive justice.” For Abelard, ransom theory allows for the devil to hold real rightful authority over humanity, putting both humanity and God in a power differential with the devil—which does not work, as it questions the sovereignty of God. Much like Anselm, Abelard argues against the

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91 Romans 3:19-26 (RSV): “Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.”

92 Schmiechen, 292.

93 Schmiechen, 292.
ransom theory’s allowing for any power to be in the control of Satan—for Christ to be in any way involved with tricking Satan.

Abelard also argues that the concept of humanity being ransomed does not, in some ways, make sense: “In what manner have we been made more righteous through the death of the Son of God than we were before, so that we ought to be delivered from punishment? And to whom was the price of blood paid for our redemption but to him in whose power we were—that is, to God himself, who (as we have said) handed us over to his torturer?”

Abelard continues following the line of logic, stating that the party that actually holds all the power in this situation would be God—and how and why would God ransom us to Godself? It does not follow logic for kidnappers to kidnap their own children, and then pay themselves the ransom. As the devil has no real power—unless the sovereignty of God is to be questioned—then the devil cannot truly be the party holding humanity for ransom.

Abelard’s larger argument, though, lies with Anselm’s more common substitutionary atonement theory and with Anselm’s logic that only the death of the “God-Man”—Christ— to restore God’s honor can work: “If [the] sin of Adam was so great that it could be expiated only by the death of Christ, what expiation will avail for the act of murder committed against Christ, and for the many great crimes committed against him or his followers? How did the death of his innocent Son so please God the Father that through it he should be reconciled to us—to us who by our sinful act have

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done the very things for which our innocent lord was put to death?" Abelard’s questioning makes a good deal of sense. If the sin of Adam is more than humanity can ever escape on its own, how much more so is actually killing God? How does humanity killing the only begotten Son of God deliver humanity from the sin of Adam and reconcile humanity to God?

As Abelard elaborates, “Indeed, how cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person [i.e. Christ] as the price for anything, or that it should in any way please him that an innocent man should be slain—still less that God should consider the death of his Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world!” While in Anselm’s theory the innocent nature of Christ, the God-man, is the reasoning behind how the world is redeemed to God, for Abelard, this is unjustifiable. In his atonement theory, Abelard begins with God’s love:

By the faith that we have concerning Christ, charity (112) is increased in us, because through this which we hold fast, that God has united our nature to himself in Christ, and by suffering in that nature, he has shown us that greatest charity, concerning that which he himself says, No one has greater love than this, etc.; [John 15:13] for his wake we cling both to him and to our neighbor by the indestructible bond of love…Righteousness, I say, dwells upon all the faithful, in their higher part, that is, in the soul, where only love can exist, not by the exhibition of exterior works.

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97 Peter Abelard, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Steven R. Cartwright, Vol. 12 of *The Fathers of the Church: Mediaeval Continuation*, ed. Gregory F. LaNave et al. (Washington, D.C.; The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 162. In this and other quotations from this passage, the boldface emphasis, indicating the biblical text that Abelard is commenting on, is found in the translation quoted here.
In a similar vein to Barth, Abelard focuses on God’s benevolent nature. But, unlike Barth, Abelard does not take God’s benevolent nature to a place of satisfaction, but instead moves it to a place of being an example. For Abelard, the most important aspect is not God’s honor, but God’s love, charity, and righteousness.

Abelard instead looks at the focal point of the atonement in a new way: “By the faith which we hold concerning Christ love is increased in us, by virtue of the conviction that God in Christ has united our human nature to himself and, by suffering in that same nature, has demonstrated to us that perfection of love which he himself says: ‘Greater love than this no man hath.’ etc.”\(^98\) Rather than looking at sin as slight against God’s honor that can only be redeemed through a substitution, Abelard views the reasoning behind Christ’s incarnation, life and work, death, and resurrection as an outpouring of the great and bountiful love of God. Abelard thus shifts the focus of the atonement from Christ dying on the cross as a substitution to Christ’s life and work.

And yet, despite this shift, Abelard’s atonement theory is not free from Christ’s death on the cross. In fact, it is just the opposite. For Abelard, Jesus is,

\begin{quote}
Whom God the Father \textbf{put forth} for us \textbf{as an atonement}, that is, a reconciler, \textbf{in his blood}, that is, through his death. And because this atonement is put forth, that is, established by God not for everyone but only for those who believe, he adds \textbf{through faith}, because this reconciliation extends only to those who believed and waited for it. \textbf{To demonstrate his righteousness}, that is, his charity, which, as was said, justifies us with him, that is, to show us his love or to teach us how much we ought to love him \textbf{who did not spare his own Son} for us.\(^99\)
\end{quote}

\(^{98}\) Abelard, “Exposition,” 278.

\(^{99}\) Abelard, \textit{Commentary on Romans}, 163.
What must be remembered is that—no matter how much Abelard focuses on love—the atonement is in the blood of Christ. For Abelard it is through his death that Christ shows humanity the extent of his love for us.

While Abelard shifts the focus, in no way does that mean that Christ’s death does not matter or have an effect on humanity. In fact it is just the opposite: “Now it seems to us that we have been justified by the blood of Christ and reconciled to God in this way: through this singular act of grace made known in us (in that his Son has taken our nature on himself, and persevered in this nature, and taught us both by his word and his example, even to the point of death)…”\(^{100}\) For Abelard, part of the great love that God shows for humanity is the fact that Christ believed in his mission to humanity so much—a mission of showing the boundless love of God to humanity—that he was willing to follow through with the mission to the end—even when that end meant death. Abelard then continues, “…he [Christ] has more fully brought us to himself by love; with the result that our hearts should be enkindled by such a gift of divine grace, and true charity should not now shrink from enduring anything for him.”\(^{101}\) This ultimate faithfulness to God on the part of Jesus, for Abelard, should have such a great effect on humanity that it moves us to live better lives, modeled on the example that Christ has provided for us through his life, work and death.

Abelard then expands this thought of humanity being moved to live a better life, thanks to the example of Christ a step farther: “Yet everyone becomes more righteous—by which we mean a greater lover of the Lord—after the Passion of Christ than before,

\(^{100}\) Abelard, “Peter Abelard on the Love of Christ in Redemption,” 299-300.

\(^{101}\) Abelard, “Peter Abelard on the Love of Christ in Redemption,” 299-300.
since a realized gift inspires greater love than one which only hoped for. Wherefore, our redemption through Christ’s suffering is that deeper affection in us which only frees us from slavery to sin, but also wins for us the true liberty of sons of God, so that we do all things out of love rather than fear…”\textsuperscript{102} With this, Abelard, in some ways, connects the concepts of justification and sanctification—the example of the justifying act actually makes us closer to God as a “greater lover of the Lord.” He also argues that, through this immense act of love, all our bonds to the slavery of sin are broken—we simply have to realize it in the light of our redemption through Christ. Again, Abelard reminds humanity of God’s love: “He showed us such great grace, than which a greater cannot be found, in his own word: ‘No one,’ he says, ‘has greater love than this: that he lays down his life for his friends.’ [Jn 15:13]”\textsuperscript{103} John 15:13 is central to Abelard’s atonement theory.

For Abelard, when Jesus became truly human it set him under the law, just like any other human: “For when God made his Son man, he actually established him under the law which he has given in common to all men. Therefore, it was necessary that by the divine precept that man love his neighbor as himself and exercise the grace of his charity among us, first by teaching us, then also by praying for us.”\textsuperscript{104} The law that Abelard references is found in Leviticus 19:18: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” Because Jesus was human, he was required to follow the law; because he was God, he actually \textit{could} follow the law in every way. Because of this unique dual nature, 

\textsuperscript{102} Abelard, “Exposition,” 284.

\textsuperscript{103} Abelard, \textit{Commentary on Romans}, 168.

\textsuperscript{104} Abelard, \textit{Commentary on Romans}, 214.
Jesus can be the ultimate example for humanity, teaching how to pray, and praying for humanity.

Abelard continues, “Therefore, by the divine precept, he was driven to pray for us and especially for those clinging to him through love, just as in the Gospel he interceded with the Father for his own very often. Indeed, his highest righteousness required that his prayer be denied in nothing; the divinity united to him permitted him nothing except what was necessary to will or do.”

For Abelard, because Jesus is bound under the law due to his humanity, he must pray, yet because of his divinity, he will be denied nothing in prayer. This works out quite well in humanity’s favor, as Jesus both loves his neighbor, who is all of humanity, prays for them; and, being denied nothing in prayer, all his prayers for humanity are answered in the affirmative.

In Abelard’s understanding, Jesus’ dual nature plays another role beyond allowing him to act as an example with regard to prayer: “He [Christ] was therefore made man; he is bound by the law of love of neighbor so that he might redeem those who were under the law but could not be saved through the law, and that he might supply form his own merits what was not in our own. And just as he was unique in sanctity, he became unique by expediency regarding the salvation of others.”

For Abelard, because Jesus is the only human capable of following the law, through his love of neighbor he can—and should—save humanity with the overabundance of merits he possesses. Furthermore, because he alone has dual nature of the “God-man,” then it is he alone who can save.

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105 Abelard, *Commentary on Romans*, 214.

106 Abelard, *Commentary on Romans*, 214.
Abelard continues with why Jesus should save—beyond the argument of “love your neighbor”: “Otherwise, what great thing does his holiness deserve if it suffices for his salvation only, and not for someone else’s? Did Adam save himself by obeying? Each of the saints obtains this through the grace of God. Much more should divine grace have accomplished something in that uniquely righteous person. The riches of a powerful man are not abundant which do not suffice to enrich others.”¹⁰⁷ For Abelard, unless Jesus is using his superabundance of merit to save humanity, there wasn’t much use for the two natures of Jesus—if a saint, who is only human, can be given merit from God, then Jesus, the “uniquely righteous person,” who has far more merit than a saint, should be far more than a good example as the saints are. He should use his richness of merits to enrich others, i.e. “redeem those who were under the law but could not be saved through the law.”¹⁰⁸

Abelard’s theory has not remained a footnote in medieval history book. A number of modern theologians also use either Abelard’s theory whole cloth or a variation of it, centering on the concept of God’s wondrous love. These theologians include the Wesleys, specifically John Wesley (1703-1791), and Jürgen Moltmann (1926- ). John Wesley’s view of the atonement embraced parts of several atonement theories: “Whenever he [Wesley] deals directly with the issue of salvation by death and resurrection of Christ, he combines images of sacrifice and satisfaction, with occasional references to ransom. But the theme of wondrous love provides a broad framework for


¹⁰⁸ Abelard, *Commentary on Romans*, 214.
understanding God’s intention in salvation and in the development of Wesley’s distinctive view of sanctification.”

Unlike Abelard and Wesley, for Moltmann it is not God estranged and offended due to humanity’s actions, but the reverse: “It is humanity that is offended and estranged from God by virtue of the immeasurable sufferings of the world.” It is because of this estrangement that Jesus becomes truly human and suffers with us, bringing the estrangement to an end.

The moral exemplar theory is also looked at by Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde (1927-2005) in his essay, “Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ.” For Forde, the concepts of satisfaction and wrath present for Abelard in his theory are intrinsically different than that present in Anselm:

As long as God is not ‘satisfied,’ we exist under his ‘wrath.’ But he is not satisfied because we will not let him be who he wants to be: the one who actually forgives, does it unconditionally, has mercy on whom he will have mercy…We are under his wrath not because of something so abstract as his ‘honor’ or his ‘justice’ to which ‘payment’ must be made, but because we will not let him be who he will be for us: unconditional love and mercy.

Rather than focus on something that, for the most part, remains interior to the Godhead—such as honor or justice—for Abelard the focus lays on the concepts of love and mercy—intangibles that intrinsically are shared, in this case, with the whole of

\[\text{109 Schmiechen, Saving Power, 298.}\]

\[\text{110 Schmiechen, Saving Power, 305.}\]

\[\text{111 Schmiechen, Saving Power, 306.}\]

humanity. While still focused on intangibles, the shift changes the playing field of atonement and how it is understood.

While speaking positively about this shift, Forde still has some issues with the concept of Abelard’s theory—and, by extension, all “subjective” theories. In Forde’s view, the shift of attention from Christ’s death to his life and work can hide the fact of Christ’s death, and what exactly happened: “Thus, it would seem, God sent his Son to a shameful and painful death to provide an example powerful enough to entice us to be reconciled to him as a God of mercy and charity.” It does not exactly make sense that a God of unfathomable love would put his only begotten Son into such a position, to die the death of a criminal and traitor. While it can be argued that Christ’s death came about because the message of love was too radical for humanity to handle without lashing out, if the focal point of Christ’s mission was to provide humanity with a moral example of how to live, what does it say that the last act of said example was to let himself be killed? If this is the logic behind Christ’s actions, then it appears to be taking the concept of there being no greater love than dying for one’s neighbor to an ultimate extreme.

As Mark Baker posits in his essay, “Contextualizing the Scandal of the Cross”: “[Abelard’s moral influence theory] would be better, however, if one presented the subjective influence of the cross as a missing element from atonement thinking, rather

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113 Forde was also against objective atonement theories, which are not discussed in “Caught in the Act.”


than as the answer to the question of why God became a human.”¹¹⁶ If one tries to use this theory in isolation from other atonement theories, a number of holes appear that can cause issues for interpreters. Baker continues, “Moral influence correctly contests the concept of a vindictive, punishing God, but often does so by speaking loudly of God’s love and rather softly of God’s judgment, instead of depicting God’s judgment as part of God’s love and distinguishing it from vindictive retribution.”¹¹⁷ Much as a good parent may punish a child for touching a hot stove because they love the child and want the child to be protected, even if it takes a punishment to get the point across, so too God’s judgment shows God’s love for humanity and God’s wanting to protect humanity, rather than a vindictive God who punishes humanity for no apparent reason or at a level that does not make sense for the infraction done by humanity.

The moral example atonement theory can also be transformed to play a part in other concepts of atonement. Among these is theory of atonement as covenant, as presented by Marit Trelstad: “God instead chose this particular mode of reconciliation or atonement, Jesus’ death, in order to demonstrate the great depth of God’s love for humanity. In response to this demonstration of God’s love, through self-giving, humans would be inspired to greater acts of love and tender charity. Therefore, Jesus’ death serves a moral example or influence that elicits human faith and conversion.”¹¹⁸


connection relies on the relational nature of both the moral example theory, and the concept of covenant itself.
Chapter Six

Christus Victor

The Christus Victor theory of the atonement is one of the oldest theories, dating from the second century or earlier. It can be seen as humanity being liberated from sin and the effects of sin, drawing from ransom theory. It was brought back into prominence by Gustaf Aulén in the 1930s.

As Gustaf Aulén (1879-1977) states, “It [Christus Victor] was, in fact, the ruling idea of the Atonement for the first thousand years of Christian history. In the Middle Ages it was gradually ousted from its place in the theological teaching of the church, but it survived still in her devotional language and her art…it has therefore every right to claim the title of the classic Christian idea of the Atonement.”¹¹¹⁹ This claim to be the “classic” theory is also established by J. Denny Weaver: “This motif carries the designation of ‘classic’ because it is the prevailing view found in the early Church Fathers.”¹²⁰ The Christus Victor model is prevalent in both the New Testament, through Paul’s imagery of participation, and the early church.

One of the earliest proponents of the Christus Victor atonement theory was Irenaeus of Lyons (d. 202). While “Irenaeus is neither the originator nor the sole advocate for describing the work of Christ in terms of liberation…for Irenaeus, Christ recapitulates the history of the race and is the beginning of the new humanity in the Spirit.”¹²¹ With the


¹²⁰ Weaver, 15.

¹²¹ Schmiechen, Saving Power, 125.
advent of Anselm’s substitutionary atonement theory, Christus Victor lost much of its following. It was with Gustaf Aulén’s book *Christus Victor* in 1931 that the theory came back to prominence.\(^{122}\) While, Aulén’s book is “merely” a historical study of the Christus Victor theory, and does not contain any new theology, it clearly and contextually lays out the theory of Christus Victor, acting as an apology for the theory of Christus Victor in the face of substitutionary atonement.\(^{123}\)

Much of Aulén’s support for the Christus Victor model comes from the fact that is the most prevalent model in the early church—both Eastern and Western—though it was not one unified theory, as he does discuss various strands of the theory that existed.\(^{124}\) Aulén further stresses this point when he writes, “The classic idea has in reality held a place in the history of Christian doctrine whose importance it would not be easy to exaggerate. Though it is expressed in a variety of forms, not all of which are equally fruitful, there can be no dispute that it is the dominant idea of the Atonement throughout the early church period. It is also in reality, as I shall hope to show, the dominant idea in the New Testament…”\(^{125}\)

In his introductory chapter, Aulén clearly lays out the basic concept of Christus Victor: “God is pictured as in Christ carrying through a victorious conflict against powers of evil which are hostile to His will. This constitutes Atonement, because the drama is a cosmic drama and the victory over the hostile powers brings to pass a new relation…He

\(^{122}\) Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 125.

\(^{123}\) Aulén, *Christus Victor*, v.

\(^{124}\) Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 48-49.

is reconciled by the very act in which He reconciles the world to Himself.”

During the three days Christ lay in the tomb, according to this theory, he was fighting an epic cosmic battle against the forces of Evil, for the salvation of all humanity.

In the second chapter of his book, Aulén discusses Irenaeus’ understanding of the atonement, laying out the classical position for the theory. Irenaeus was a second-century theologian, born around 140 CE, who acted as a missionary to the Gauls, centered in Lyons, and has been described as “the most important Christian conversationalist and theologian between the apostles and the third-century genius Origen.”

Because of this fact, Aulén argues, “Our choice of Irenaeus may, then, be justified on the ground of his general theological importance, as well as of the undoubted fact that he is the first patristic writer to provide us with a clear and comprehensive doctrine of the Atonement and redemption.”

Irenaeus is one of the earliest writers to discuss the atonement, and his discussion of the atonement is interwoven with his discussion of the incarnation.

Irenaeus begins his analysis of atonement with why humanity cannot atone for itself: “In fact, it was not possible for humankind, which has once been conquered, and had been dashed to pieces by its disobedience, to refashion itself and obtain the prize of victory….And so the Son, Word of God that He is, accomplished both by coming down from the Father and becoming incarnate, and descending even to death, and bringing the

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126 Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 4-5.


economy of our salvation to completion.” Christ refashions humanity and wins for us victory because humanity has been “dashed to pieces.” Much like a coffee mug that has been broken and glued back together does not look the same, so too humanity has been broken, and the brokenness is obvious. For Irenaeus, Christ does more than glue humanity back together. He makes it as though humanity had never been broken in the first place.

To refashion humanity and win for it the victory over sin, humanity needs to be reconciled to God: “Again, unless God had given salvation, we would not possess it securely; and unless the human race had been united with God, it would not be partaker of imperishability. For it behooved the Mediator of God and humanity, by His kinship to both, to lead them back to friendship and concord, and to bring it about that God would take humankind to Himself, and that humankind would give itself to God.” For Irenaeus, the way that God and humanity can be reconciled to one another best is for God to take humanity upon Godself. Irenaeus expands on why God taking humanity upon Godself is the best solution, stating “Certainly, it behooved him who could put sin to death and redeem humanity who was liable to death, to become that [this latter] was, namely, humanity—humanity which had been drawn into slavery by sin, but was held bound by death. The result would be that death would be put to death by humanity, and humanity would escape from death.” In this concept of death being put to death by

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130 Irenaeus of Lyons *Against the Heresies* 3.18.7.

131 Irenaeus of Lyons *Against the Heresies* 3.18.7.
humanity, it is the humanity taken on by God that does the slaying of death, not the humanity that is being saved. Irenaeus further nuances this, stating “But if he seemed to be flesh without becoming flesh, His work was not true. On the contrary, what He seemed to be, that He also was, namely God, who recapitulated in Himself the ancient handiwork of man [Adam], that He might kill sin and destroy death and give life to humankind. And for this reason his works are true.”132 God cannot simply pretend humanity and have the death-slaying occur. It is the combination of divinity taking on humanity that allows for the humanity to slay death.

The concept of God taking on humanity is seen in a different light in Aulén: “It is [Irenaeus’s] constant teaching that God Himself has entered into this world of sin and death; ‘the same hand of God that formed us in the beginning, and forms us in our mother’s womb, in these latter days sought us when we were lost, gaining His lost sheep and laying it on His shoulders and bringing it back with joy to the flock of life.’”133

Having discussed how God will save humanity, Irenaeus then turns to why humanity needs saving in the first place: “For if humankind, which was made by God that it might live, but which lost that life when it was injured by the serpent who corrupted it, would no longer return to life but would be altogether abandoned to death, God would be overcome and the serpent’s wickedness would this prevail over God’s will.”134 For Irenaeus, if God does not save humanity, whom he made for living, leaving humanity to

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132 Irenaeus of Lyons Against the Heresies 3.18.7.
133 Aulén, Christus Victor, 21.
134 Irenaeus of Lyons, Against the Heresies 3.23.1.
death, the God is beaten by evil. This cannot happen, so God saves humanity. Irenaeus then explains how humanity will be saved:

But since God is unconquerable and long-suffering, He showed himself long suffering in the correction of humanity and put all under probation, as we have said. He bound the strong one by the second Man, and plunders his vessels, and abolished death by vivifying the man who was had been killed…. And so he who had led humanity into captivity was justly recaptured by God. Moreover, the human race, which had been led captive, was loosed from the bonds of punishment.\textsuperscript{135}

Because God is unconquerable, God was able to catch the “strong one”—whether Satan or sin personified—by the second Man, Christ Jesus and death by giving humanity so much life that death didn’t stand a chance.

For Aulén, this saving of humanity takes a very similar path as to Irenaeus: “The work of Christ is first and foremost a victory over the powers which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death, and the devil. These may be said to be in a measure personified, but in any case they are objective powers; and the victory of Christ creates a new situation, bringing their rule to and end, and setting men free from their dominion.”\textsuperscript{136} One aspect that Aulén makes clear is that, whatever power Christ is fighting, it is objective, meaning that it does not have an independent existence—it is not some power outside and uncreated by God. This is an important aspect to acknowledge because, if one holds that God made all things \textit{ex nihilo}, then any concept of evil that would be outside God’s creation would then either disprove creation \textit{ex nihilo}, or is heretical.

In Aulén’s opinion, the center of Irenaeus’s atonement thought is the fact that the “Divine victory accomplished in Christ stands in the centre [sic] of Irenaeus’ thought, and

\textsuperscript{135} Irenaeus of Lyons, \textit{Against the Heresies} 3.23.1.

\textsuperscript{136} Aulén, \textit{Christus Victor}, 20.
forms the central element in the *recapitulatio*, the restoring and the perfecting of the creation, which is his most comprehensive theological idea."\(^{137}\) It is through God’s restoring relationship with humanity that God’s restoration and perfecting of creation occurs.

Aulén also argues that “…Irenaeus is definitely opposed to a moralistic view, which would have no other meaning of sin than as separate and individual acts of sin; on the contrary, he always regards sin organically.”\(^{138}\) This understanding of sin allows for knowledge of sin as more than individual acts and allows for a recognition of structural sin. Christus Victor’s allowing for an awareness of structural sin puts it in contrast with theories that are more focused on the crime and punishment model of sin that is common in theories such as Anselm’s substitutionary theory.

It is Aulén’s argument that Anselm’s atonement, rather than being beneficial to the tradition, actually departs from the path that the tradition of the early church provided:

If our hypothesis is true, the Latin type of Christian doctrine turns out to be really a side-track [sic] in the history of Christian dogma—admittedly of vast importance and influence, but still only a side-track [sic]; and the proud claim of Roman theology to represent the continuity of Christian doctrine cannot be substantiated. The history of the doctrine of the Atonement shows clearly that just at this central point of the Latin [Anselm’s theory] view definitely deviates from the classic Christian view.\(^{139}\)

\(^{137}\) Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 22.


\(^{139}\) Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 14.
Since Aulén organized his book as merely a history of Christus Victor, it stands to reason that his synopsis of the theory would take the form of a historical comparison. Aulén begins with the structure of the atonement:

In the classic type the work of Atonement is accomplished by God Himself in Christ, yet at the same time the passive form also is used: God is reconciled with the world. The alteration is not accidental: He is reconciled only because He Himself reconciles the world with Himself and Himself with the world. The safeguard of the continuity of God’s operation is the dualistic outlook, the Divine warfare against the evil that holds mankind in bondage, and the triumph of Christ. But this necessitates a discontinuity of the legal order: there is no satisfaction of God’s justice, for the relation of man to God is viewed in the light, not just of merit and justice, but of grace.\(^{140}\)

This he contrasts with the Latin type, Anselm’s substitutionary theory, in which the “legal order is unbroken” arguing that this legality does not allow for any change in God’s view on humanity.\(^{141}\) In short, it limits God to only looking at humanity—and its actions—as a slight against God’s honor. Aulén looks at the idea of sin, contrasting Christus Victor with the moralism present in Anselm: “Here the classic type [Christus Victor] regards sin as an objective power standing behind men, and the Atonement as the triumph of God over sin, death, and the devil. It might seem, therefore, that this type treats sin as the impersonal force, and so weakens the idea of a direct relationship between God’s work and man’s soul; for it is over this objective power of evil that God’s victory is won.”\(^{142}\)

Aulén then looks at how atonement and salvation are connected: “The classic idea of salvation is that the victory which Christ gained once for all is continued in the world

\(^{140}\) Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 145-146.

\(^{141}\) Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 146.

\(^{142}\) Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 147.
of the Holy Spirit, and its fruits reaped. So it is with the Fathers, and so it is in Luther; but it is typical of him that the finished work and the continuing work are even more closely connected together than before."  

In his history of Christus Victor theology, Aulén argues that Luther’s theory of the atonement is a variation of Christus Victor, though it could be argued that Luther’s atonement is made up of a blend of theories. Aulén continues, “The victory of Christ over the powers of evil is an eternal victory, therefore present as well as past. Therefore Justification and Atonement are really one and the same thing; Justification is simply the Atonement brought into the present, so that here and now the Blessing of God prevails over the curse.”

Aulén finishes his summing up of the Christus Victor theory by looking at how atonement and one’s conception of God are interrelated: “This opposition reaches its climactic in the tension between the Divine Love and the Divine Wrath. But here the solution is not found in any sort of rational settlement; it is rather that the Divine Love prevails over the Wrath, the Blessing overcomes the Curse, by the way of Divine self-oblation and sacrifice. The redeeming work of Christ shows how much the Atonement ‘cost’ God.” For Aulén, God’s love wins out, but at great cost to God.

There are a number of issues that must be looked at with regard to the Christus Victor model of atonement. Among these issues, Weaver lists:

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143 Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 150.


Reasons for the demise of Christus Victor usually suggested by writers of the history of the doctrine include: (i) aversion to the idea that God would either acknowledge certain rights of the devil or stoop to overcoming the devil through trickery, (ii) discomfort with the motif’s military and battle imagery, (iii) incompatibility of either the image of a cosmic battle or a ransom payment to Satan with a modern cosmology, (iv) lack of evidence of the victory of the reign of God in our world, and (v) Christus Victor’s dualistic outlook in light of a modern worldview composed mostly of ‘gray areas.’

One of the greater theological issues is the idea that the devil has some sort of rights. By allowing the devil to have acknowledged rights, is God losing part of God’s sovereignty? This too is a worry for Forde: “But the question is whether all this exoneration has not been purchased at too great a price: God loses some of his sovereignty to his dualistic adversaries, and the work of Christ is translated to a semi-mythical cosmic battle quite removed from our world.” The existence of these “dualistic adversaries,” as Forde calls them—the devil, sin, cosmic forces of evil, etcetera—presents a great issue.

While Christus Victor is distinct and direct with stating that it is not God who killed Christ (in Christus Victor, it is these “dualistic adversaries” that kill Christ), it raises the question: What sort of power do these adversaries have, that they can kill the incarnate God—and where did they get these powers? They cannot have received them from God, for if they did, then it would be God killing Christ, which this theory states it is not the case. The only other answer is that there is a second deity as powerful as, if not more powerful than, God. This, though, is ditheism, if not full-blown polytheism, which, in Christianity, is heretical.

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147 Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 16.

The militaristic language used to describe the atoning act in Christus Victor can also raise some concerns. Connecting Christ, whom many people view as a pacifist (and one can find arguments for and against such a view), with language that sound like it might come out of the plot of a summer action-thriller can create some dissidence that can make it more difficult for some groups—including those who have been victims of violence—of people to use the analogy.

The question of the cause of Christ’s death must also be addressed. Weaver looks at this, writing, “A controversial question at this point is whether God willed the death of Jesus…And when those are the terms of the question [Jesus’ death satisfying a divine need], narrative Christus Victor responds, ‘No, God did not will the death of Jesus.’” Unlike its replacement theory, substitutionary atonement, Christ did not die to satisfy a need within the Godhead. Weaver continues, “There is a sense, however, in which narrative Christus Victor can respond, ‘Yes, God did will the death of Jesus.’ Jesus’ mission was to witness to the reign of God. It was God’s will that Jesus carry out that mission faithfully, even when it meant death.” In Weaver’s understanding, Christ’s mission was a suicide mission—to accomplish the defeat of the forces of Evil, as was his mission in Christus Victor, a mission given to him by God the Father, he had to die. If Christus Victor is looked at in that light, then it is, in some ways, no better than substitutionary atonement with regards to the death of Christ being laid at the feet of God the Father.

149 Weaver, The Nonviolent Atonement, 91.

150 Weaver, The Nonviolent Atonement, 91.
Chapter Seven

Are these nonviolent?

Before we can answer the question of whether or not these models of the atonement are, in fact, nonviolent, we must first answer the question of what is nonviolence and who is “violent” in the case of a “violent” atonement theory. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, nonviolence can be defined as “Avoidance of the use of violence, esp. as a principle,” and defines violence as

1. a. The exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property; action or conduct characterized by this; treatment or usage tending to cause bodily injury or forcibly interfering with personal freedom. b. In the phr. to do violence to, to do violence unto (or with indirect object): To inflict harm or injury upon; to outrage or violate. †Also to make violence… d. Undue constraint applied to some natural process, habit, etc., so as to prevent its free development or exercise. Now used in political contexts with varying degrees of appropriateness… 2. a. With a and pl. An instance or case of violent, injurious, or severe treatment; a violent act or proceeding… 3. Force or strength of physical action or natural agents; forcible, powerful, or violent action or motion (in early use freq. connoting destructive force or capacity)…

As can be seen, the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition for violence is rather broad. While all the sub-definitions listed can be applied to the concept of violence and the atonement, definitions 1a, 1b, and 1d work best for the theories of the atonement.

Much of the objection to violence surrounding atonement models centers on the model of substitutionary atonement. As we have seen, much of this friction is caused due to violence supposed on the part of God the Father rather than on the part of Christ: “Atonement orthodoxy tends to depict Jesus as the Savior child whose obedience to his

Father’s will, or whose desire to please his Father, knew no limits…. To love is to relinquish self, this orthodoxy implies, for that is what Jesus did. The impact of this pedagogy on those who lack personal or social power can be devastating indeed.”

What this view of the atonement brings into question is Christ’s agency. Is Christ capable of acting on his own behalf and of his own free will—or is the atonement the result of God the Father coercing Christ into the action that brings about atonement? As has been seen by looking at Anselm’s own writing in *De Cur Homo*, there is no coercion relating to Christ’s death.

Also, in her article “Putting the Cross in Context,” Marit Trelstad argues:

First, glorifying the cross potentially treats suffering as though it God-given and inevitable. This makes the loving character of God in relation to the world dubious and also models God-human relations on a patriarchal model of relationship that idealized the roles of hero and helpless victim. Second, it valorizes passive suffering as redemptive. Third, the weight of ‘redemptive’ suffering is borne primarily by the oppressed and disadvantaged and it is most often promoted and preached by those who stand to benefit from others’ suffering. Finally, it may lead to a human neglect of our individual and collective responsibility to end suffering and hold perpetrators of violence accountable.

The issues she brings up are most often applied to the so-called violent atonement theories of Anselm and ransom, yet they can also be found, though to a lesser extent, in the non-violent theories of Abelard and Christus Victor.

As can be seen after looking at Abelard’s moral example atonement theory and Christus Victor, it is possible to have an atonement theory that does not lay the death of Christ at the feet of God, or have Christ acting a substitution to regain honor for God. And yet, even without the issues brought to light by substitutionary atonement, there is

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152 Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 63.

153 Trelstad, “Putting the Cross in Context,” 113.
still violence present. This remaining presence of violence can be a problem for two distinct groups: pacifists and victims of violence. In both cases, this remaining strain of violence can cause those who are in these groups to move away from even discussing atonement. The mere fact that Christ died on a cross is violent. Any theory connected to Christ’s death is, in some way violent. But in both cases, Christ still dies a criminal’s death, nailed to a tree. Every human being dies—and if Christ had a human nature, like ours in all but sin, it is within the realm of reason that, had he not been crucified, he could have lived a long life and died a natural, and peaceful, death. If this were the case, then Christianity would be a radically different religion—but it is not the case. Jesus Christ died a slow, agonizing death nailed to a tree, probably barely able to breathe. This is a violent death. And any atonement theory centered on or connected to this violent death thus has an element of violence inherent in it.

With regard to violence and atonement, one key aspect is to whom the responsibility for the violence is attached. As has been seen, in the case of Anselm’s satisfaction theory, many of the arguments against it center on an understanding of violence being attributed to God the Father against God the Son, as found in the divine child abuse model. This violence fits definition 1a.

In the case of the Ransom theory, the violence present is not in the vein of definition 1a, as with Anselm, but instead that of definition 1d—violence consisting of God constraining Satan via God tricking Satan with the bait of Jesus in human form.

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While this appears to be of a lesser level of violence, it still is a level of violence, one that cannot and should not simply be ignored.

The theories of Abelard’s moral exemplar and Christus Victor, despite their title of non-violent, do both contain a level of violence. In the case of Abelard, it is not a matter of violence on the part of God that is present. Rather, the violence lies at the feet of humanity—a humanity that killed Jesus. The violence present in Abelard is of the same sort as that present in Anselm, definition 1a, but it is at the hands of a different party.

In the case of Christus Victor, the violence is less well defined and more difficult to find. Christ’s death is the opening salvo in the cosmic battle between good and evil—the death is intrinsic and necessary for the theory to work. But the cause of Christ’s death—the guilty party is not easily discovered. In addition to this, there is also the imagery of humanity being “dashed to pieces” as seen in the writings of Irenaeus. The violence found in this theory is a combination of definitions 1a and 1b, making the discussion of violence connected to this theory very complex.

This issue of violence is also addressed in Gerhard Forde’s essay, “Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ.” In the context of discussing Abelardian atonement, he asks, “How can God possibly be ‘justified’ in sending his Son into this world to be cruelly murdered at our hands just to provide an example of what everybody knew already?” If the atoning act is the moral example that Jesus shows humanity

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155 Irenaeus, *Against the Heretics* 3.18.2.

through his life and work, then why does he have to die? To show his ultimate obedience to God? What example does that present for humanity? What does that say about God?

Luckily, this is not where this issue can be left. A few pages later, Forde comes back to this question: “Why could not God just up and forgive? Let us start there. If we look at the narrative about Jesus, the actual events themselves, the ‘brute facts’ as they have come down to us, the answer is quite simple. He did! Jesus came preaching repentance and forgiveness, declaring the bounty and mercy of his ‘Father.’ The problem, however, is that we could not buy that. And so we killed him.”

It is not God that sentences Jesus to death; it is humanity—which just feeds back into Abelard’s understanding of the atonement in contrast to that of Anselm. And yet Christ dies. In many ways, it would only be possible to see the atonement as truly nonviolent if the atoning act, whatever it may be, could be completely and totally separated from Christ’s death.

In her essay, "Otra vez la cristología," Nancy Bedford discusses the concept of negative, “toxic” Christologies:

The importance of avoiding "toxic" christologies as outlined by Guaman Poma and Sor Juana, remains a major hub in the Latin American Christology, which becomes particularly relevant when taking into account the experiences of women in our country. To say that we should not understand Jesus as not expired or not yet as celestial monarch transmits the content of what if, that is, not yet announced what will be the positive theological construction, and in that sense still is not a constructive Christology.

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For Bedford, the connection between Christology and atonement is a very thin line. What she defines a toxic Christology is one connected to an overly violent theory of the atonement—one that advocates for suffering and/or subjugation for women in the name of following in the image of Christ. For Bedford, understanding the issues raised by toxic Christologies will allow for a better understanding of those people subject to these Christologies—whether in Latin America or around the corner. Bedford then goes on to explain one way to find a better Christology, one that frees and empowers humanity, rather than providing a new subjection:

A Christology that takes into account our grandmothers asks: In what way bear the marks of Jesus on our bodies? Is this the Jesus heals the wounds our and our dry the tears? Or is the Christology in which we are engaged and engrossed hurts us and poisons the body, that of others, that of the earth itself? It occurs to me that Christology that takes into account the grandmothers and take them and their stories seriously (whether or not Christian) are less likely to be handled with abstract and incorporeal patterns that hide behind the passive voice and third person the interests of a few.  

By taking into account the questions posed by Bedford, a theologian can find a real-world Christology that benefits humanity.

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como vencido ni como monarca celestial todavía no transmite el contenido de lo que sí es, es decir, todavía no comunica cuál será la construcción teológica positiva, y en ese sentido todavía no constituye una cristología constructiva.” Translated from Spanish by Kaeleigh Post.

Bedford, “Otra vez la cristología,” 45. Original Text: “Una cristología que toma en cuenta a nuestras abuelas pregunta: ¿De qué manera llevamos las marcas de Jesús en nuestros cuerpos? ¿Jesús nos cura las heridas y nos seca las lágrimas? ¿O es que la cristología en la que estamos enfrascados y enfrascadas nos hiere y nos envenena el propio cuerpo, el de los demás, el de la misma tierra? Se me ocurre que una cristología que toma en cuenta a las abuelas y las toma a ellas y a sus historias en serio (hayan sido o no cristianas) es menos propensa a manejarse con modelos abstractos e incorpóreos que esconden tras la voz pasiva y la tercera persona los intereses de unos pocos.” Translated from Spanish by Kaeleigh Post.
The non-violent atonement theories are surprisingly not all that less violent than the violent theories that they were to replace. The main difference is upon whom the violence is attached—God, humanity, or anthropomorphic evil. In the case of the so-called violent theories, the violence could in some way be attached to God. In the non-violent theories the violence was attached to humanity or anthropomorphic evil.
Chapter Eight

What is Sin?

Before beginning to attempt to work towards a non-violent model of atonement, one key section of the atonement matrix must be examined: sin. Why does how sin is defined matter to atonement? Because for sin to be removed, one must understand what is being removed.

According to Patrick Cheng, a proponent of queer theology, “Sin, most simply defined, is separation from God. In the same way that we might be separated from a loved one—either emotionally or physically—after an argument or fight, sin can be understood as separation, or alienation, from God.”160 This separation from God can be viewed in a number of different ways, which, in turn, bring about different views of the atonement.

The most common view is that of sin as crime: “Theologically speaking, sin has traditionally been viewed as a crime against God. That is, sin is understood as a violation or transgression of God’s divine law…Analogously, to the extent that sin is understood as a crime against God the sovereign, the punishment of the sinner is also required.”161 This understanding can be traced back to the patristic period, especially the works of Augustine of Hippo.

Augustine draws his understanding of the fallen nature of humanity from his reading of Romans 5:12. "Through one man [or “because of one man”] sin entered the

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161 Cheng, From Sin to Amazing Grace, 36.
world, and through sin, death; and thus death came. Upon all men, in that all sinned." The common reading of this verse, at the time, supported by John Chrysostom, was that Adam’s sin brought death into the world, and humanity continues to suffer death because all humanity sins. Augustine, reading this verse in Latin rather than Greek, understood this verse as stating, "in whom all sinned" i.e. through one man, referring to Adam and his descendants, all of humanity.\(^{162}\)

In Augustine’s thinking, original sin is transmitted via sperm, and all humanity inherited original sin, as all humanity was created from Adam and his seed.\(^ {163}\) While this progression of logic may not fully make sense to the modern mind, it was completely logical for Augustine, whose understanding of procreation understood sperm as containing all the genetic material necessary for procreation. Because of this understanding, for Augustine, from the moment of conception, humanity is fallen: “Who reminds me of the sin of my infancy? for ‘none is pure from sin before you, not even an infant of one day upon the earth’ (Job 14:4-5 LXX)."\(^ {164}\)

For Augustine, this fallen nature is best seen through the lusts: "Fettered by the flesh's morbid impulse and lethal sweetness, I dragged my chain, but was afraid to be free of it...using my tongue to weave and scatter sweet snares in his [Alyoius’] path to entrap


his honest and unfettered feet."165 Not just lust is proof of humanity’s fallen nature. Additional proof of the fall for Augustine is the existence of spontaneous sexual excitement—as exemplified by spontaneous erections: "For the soul, now taking delight in its freedom to do wickedness, and distaining to serve God, was itself deprived of the erstwhile subjection of the body to it."166

Augustine also goes on to explain that Jesus was without sin because he was conceived without sperm.167 Jesus’ truly human nature came though Mary, allowing him to be conceived without sin. Augustine goes on to explain: “For the only Son of God, remaining immutable in Himself, put on humanity and bestowed upon mankind [sic] the spirit of His love through the mediation of a Man…and because He had imbued our nature with the desire for blessedness and immortality, He, remaining blessed even while assuming mortality, taught us to despise what we fear by undergoing it.”168 Because of this understanding of how sin is transmitted, overall there was a great deal of negativity with regard to sexuality: “It is only through the three goods of marriage (fidelity, procreation, and sacrament) that sexual acts can be redeemed. Furthermore, [it] is only through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—who is the second Adam—that the punishment for original sin is reversed.”169

165 Augustine, *Confessions* VI.xii.21.

166 Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans* XIII.13.


168 Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans* X.29.

Augustine felt that sin was an intrinsic part of the post-world and humanity’s fallen nature, and that death was the price of sin. In Augustine’s thought, even with grace, punishment for sin occurs:

For he who first gave admission to sin has been punished together with all those who were in Him as in a root, so that no one may escape this just and deserved punishment unless redeemed by mercy and undeserved grace...for if all were to remain under the penalty of just damnation, the mercy of redeeming grace would appear in no one. On the other hand, if all were to be brought across the darkness into light, the truth of retribution would have appeared in no one.  

Augustine’s logic for this is, if no one suffered punishment for his or her sins, then grace would not, and could not appear. Without just punishment or “the penalty of just damnation,” the grace of God cannot exist, and vice versa—they are intrinsically tied together.

This view of sin as “crime” is especially connected to the theories of substitutionary atonement, ransom, and Christus Victor, though it can be connected to other theories as well. The relation to these theories for the atonement is especially strong in that these three theories center on the idea of having to make satisfaction for the crime of sin or humanity needing to be ransomed because of the crime of sin. One issue with the legalistic view is that it:

…leads to the privileging of pride and disobedience as the root causes of sin. It also leads to a negative view of sexuality, which is understood as the means by which original sin is passed on from generation to generation and thus can only be redeemed through the procreative act. As many feminist theologians have argued, the main issue for many women—and I would argue, LGBT and other oppressed people—is not that they have too much pride, but rather that they do not have enough pride. That is, sin takes the form of hiding and running away from the gifts that God has given us. Instead of pride, sin takes the form of same, or the inability to lift oneself up high enough.  

170 Augustine, The City of God Against the Pagans XXI.12.

171 Cheng, Radical Love, 72.
The concept of pride, and its status as chief sin, can cause issues for a person if he or she has spent his or her entire life being told that any suffering he or she experiences due to who he or she is (person of color, LGBT, et cetera.) should be borne joyfully because Christ bore his suffering without complaint. Those whose whole life has been suffering, and who have been told that they should not have pride in who they are, can find a model of sin that focuses on pride as chief sin to be of little to no help, if not actually detrimental. It also, in regard to sexuality, causes issues, in that it boxes people in—if a person is not called to celibacy or able to procreate in his or her relationship, then they are encouraging sin, or, in the case of heterosexual couples, even perhaps spread original sin.

In contrast to crime model of sin prevalent in Western Christianity, in Eastern Orthodoxy, “…the tragedy of Adam’s fall is not that all people inherit his guilt, as in the Augustinian tradition. They [the Greek Fathers] hold, most certainly, that all people are sinful, and that the fall was an incomparable disaster. But we all sin freely and incur our own guilt. Rather than guilt, in Adam we have inherited death, mortality, and corruption.”

In this case, it is not a matter of all being sinners from conception. Instead:

Man sinned freely. His sin consisted of fundamentally in is disobedience, in the violation of the divine command. Adam ignored the command of God. He took an ungrateful stance before his unique and eternal benefactor, God…. Humanity lost the divine gift. Human nature became distorted. Death comes…. The image of God within us is weakened. We ourselves preclude the possibility of our union with God…. The divine image of the first creation which exists in the whole of

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human nature, including both body and spirit, was not totally destroyed by that first sin; it was weakened, it was darkened, but it was not lost.\footnote{Christoforos Stavropoulos, “Partakers of Divine Nature,” in Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader, ed. Daniel B. Clendenin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 187.}

For Eastern Orthodoxy, the image of God, and how to strengthen its appearance is key. For Cheng, the divine image has a similar weight: “Under the Christ-Centered model, sin is understood not as a crime, but rather as immaturity. That is, like children or adolescents who have yet to grow to full adulthood, we human beings are constantly in a process of growing toward our ultimate end, which is Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega of all things.”\footnote{Cheng, From Sin to Amazing Grace, 55.} In this Christ-centered model, the way to strengthen the image of God within humanity is the process of maturing. In its present state, humanity’s sin is an immaturity that can be overcome.

In contrast to the understanding sin as a crime against God, Cheng argues for an understanding of sin centered on the concept of radical love—and the rejection thereof: “…sin can be better understood as the rejection of radical love. That is, if God is radical love (in other words, a love so extreme that it dissolves all kinds of boundaries), then sin is what opposes God, or what opposes radical love. Sin is the resistance to dissolving boundaries and divisions. Specifically, we sin when we reinforce existing divisions with respect to sexuality, gender identity, or other factors.”\footnote{Cheng, Radical Love, 71.} This radical love is for both one another and for the individual person, and, when successful, it will break down all barriers, not just in the greater world, but also within us individually.
Cheng continues: “…a better way to think about sin is to define sin as our opposing to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. For example, to the extent that God lifts up humanity in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, then sin can be understood to be shame, or refusal to be lifted up and to take our rightful place as people who are made in the image and likeness of God.”

For Cheng, rather than having a crime-punishment understanding, it is a maturity-shame understanding. Unlike crime-punishment, in which one leads to the other, the maturity-shame is an antithesis. For Cheng, as one increases in maturity, growing into what God has done for humanity, one should feel less shame, or trying to act against what God has done for humanity. Rather than being a one-way street as crime-punishment is, allowing movement in only one direction, maturity-shame is more like a see-saw—as one increases, the other decreases—movement can occur in both directions. As a person matures more into who God created him or her to be, he or she feels less shame.

For Cheng, “Furthermore, grace is not just the process of growing toward maturity in Christ. The doctrine of theosis also acknowledges that Jesus Christ—as the Word incarnate and the revelation of God—is grace itself. That is, Jesus Christ, as the ultimate fulfillment of the cosmos, is the greatest unmerited gift of all from God. It is through this unmerited gift of grace from God that humanity has any shot of maturing towards what God wants us to be. Without this grace, humanity could do nothing.

176 Cheng, Radical Love, 73.

177 Theosis will be more fully defined in the next section.

178 Cheng, From Sin to Amazing Grace, 57.
The connection between how sin is defined and how atonement works is a fine and delicate one, but one forged out of steel. An atonement theory such as Anselm’s satisfaction theory would not work, in any way, shape, or form, with the Eastern Orthodox understanding of sin. To try and make it work would be folly. The entire basis of Anselm’s theory rests on a crime-punishment model for sin. With any other understanding of sin, the theory would crumble into a pile of useless jargon. Ransom, Moral Exemplar, and Christus Victor might have a better chance of working, but all three would need at least some major adjusting, and even then would have issues.
Chapter Nine

Theosis

While Western Christianity has focused its theories for the atonement through the lens of legal terminology, the Eastern lens of philosophy has provided for a distinctly different concept: theosis. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “deification,” or the regarding someone or something as a god or divine.\(^\text{179}\) On the surface, to the Western Christian mind, this seems like a bizarre concept, bordering on heretical. But, like with many things, there is a far greater level of nuance necessary for comprehension than appears at first glance.

A far more nuanced definition can be found in Christoforos Stavopoulos’s essay, “Partakers of Divine Nature”: “Thus, human beings, created as they are of matter and spirit, are called to share in all the good things of God. Within each human being, God sows all those seedlike gifts which make us his image and lead us toward his likeness, insomuch as we cultivate these gifts. This is our calling—theosis. Theosis is achieved little by little, through the step-by-step spiritualization of our human nature.”\(^\text{180}\)

As Daniel Clendenin states in his book, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*:

…all of the Eastern theologians, both ancient and modern, uniformly and categorically repudiate any hint of pantheism. Whatever it means to “become God,” the essence of human nature is not lost. In this sense human theosis is a relative rather than an absolute transformation. There is a real and genuine union


of the believer with God, but it is not a literal fusion or confusion in which the integrity of human nature is compromised...we can further our definition of theosis by looking at the various synonyms and analogies that Orthodox theologians use to explain the mystery of salvation. Theosis can be described by a number of related words in the vocabulary of the Fathers. It can be transformation, union, participation, partaking, intermingling, elevation, interpenetration, transmutation, commingling, assimilation, reintegration, adoption, or re-creation. Divinization implies our being intertwined with Christ, an influx of the divine, or the attainment of similitude with God.181

Many of these terms, such as transformation and adoption, are used in the Western Church as well to describe the relationship between humanity and God, though most often as an act clearly done to humanity by God rather than an act that humanity has any non-passive role in.

One Western theologian that has begun working with theosis is Patrick Cheng, a systematic theology professor at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who works in the field of queer theology. In his book, *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ*, Cheng argues against the crime-based model for sin—and the atonement theories attached to it—and, instead, argues that

…the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of deification, or theosis, is a much more optimistic view of the human condition than the crime-centered doctrine of original sin. Instead of fallen beings who are held in bondage under the original sin of our first parents, we human beings are seen as incomplete persons who are constantly growing in stature towards God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Although we may wander away from God and lose our way from time to time—we will ultimately find our way back home.182

For Cheng, the vocabulary used to describe this growth is maturing. For Cheng, the road home, to what God wants us to be, may be bumpy or winding, and may contain wrong

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turns, whether few or many. Yet it still remains the road home. Cheng continues, “The notion of grace as deification—that is, the process of becoming divine—is grounded in biblical texts such as Psalm 82:6 (‘I say, ‘You are gods, children of the most high, all of you’’) and 2 Peter 1:4 (‘[You] may become participants in the divine nature’).” This biblical support allows for a deeper understanding of the concept of deification or theosis.

Cheng’s argument plays off the difference in how the East and West understand sin: “…what if Jesus Christ—understood as the telos, or end goal, of creation—is at the center of our reflection about sin and grace? What if sin is understood less as a crime or fall from an original state of perfection, but rather an immaturity, spiritual or otherwise? Similarly, what if grace were understood less as an acquittal or rehabilitation of criminals, but rather as deification, or the process of growing and maturing to become like God?”

Rather than looking at human nature—and its fallenness—as a crime against God, Cheng argues, “Instead of understanding atonement (that is, the ‘at-one-ment’ between humanity and God) solely in terms of penal substitution, we can understand atonement as the renewal of the cosmos. Because we have lost our way, God has sent Jesus Christ—in whom all things were created and in whom all things ‘hold together’—to ‘gather up all things’ and to renew creation.” How exactly Christ’s coming to gather up all things and the concept of theosis are connected is difficult to see. It could be that, as Christ has

183 Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 57.
184 Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 53-54.
185 Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 58.
come to renew creation; with it he allows for humanity to have hope that they can become more like God wishes them to be, though it is not clear in Cheng.

In this theory, once again we come across Irenaeus of Lyons. In addition to providing support for the Christus Victor theory of the atonement, according to Cheng, he also provides support for the concept of theosis: “One source for a Christ-centered model of sin and grace is Irenaeus of Lyons, the second-century theologian who is best known for his refutation of gnostic heresies in *Against Heresies*…In Irenaeus’s view, Adam and Eve’s disobedience was not so much a crime or a disastrous fall from an original state of perfection. Rather, Adam and Eve were immature creatures who had not yet fully attained the stature of Jesus Christ.”

This understanding both allows for greater clarity for Cheng’s theory, as well as shedding more light on how Christus Victor functions with regards to the players in the cosmic battle. It allows for more precision with regards to theosis in that it gives more nuance to the state of Adam and Eve. Rather than committing the crime of eating from the tree without much forethought, they were merely immature. One issue though is it is unclear as to whether Adam and Eve had not attained that status of Jesus Christ, the God-man, with full human nature, or if he means the second person of the trinity. The difference in this is great and is a cause for questioning.

Cheng continues, “Creation and salvation were bound together; God patterned humanity after the preexistent Christ, and Jesus Christ is the end to which creation is


187 One issue though is it is unclear as to whether Adam and Eve had not attained that status of Jesus Christ, the God-man, with full human nature, or if he means the second person of the trinity. The difference in this is great and is a cause for questioning.
ultimately directed. According to Irenaeus, Jesus Christ ‘became what we are in order to make us what he is himself.’”

Patrick Cheng’s advocacy of the concept of theosis has both strong and weak points. One of the strong points to the concept is that it avoids the crime-punishment model of sin that can alienate people, especially of minority groups who have had the crime-punishment model of sin used against them. By using the Eastern Orthodox understanding of sin, it allows for the entire theological set-up to have a much more favorable view of humanity without eliminating the concept of sin. The Orthodox view of sin, in turn, avoids many of the issues associated with the more common western understandings of the atonement, including the idea of sacrificial suffering on the part of humanity, and the levels of violence that are found in those concepts..

One drawback to this concept is the fact that it is working from a rubric outside the Western tradition, pulling from the Eastern Orthodox, and thus can be at times more difficult for Western Christians to understand. In addition, it views sin from a Pelagian understanding of sin rather than an Augustinian understanding. Another challenge, related to the first, is that, rather than pulling from the concept of justification and its understanding of atonement being an action outside humanity’s power, as many Western concepts, instead it is more connected to Western concept of sanctification, which has some features in common with theosis (while not being identical). All in all, Cheng’s

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188 Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 60; Cheng’s elaboration raises the same questions as the original argument. A clarification of how he is defining terms would eliminate many of these questions.

189 The various ways in which the crime-punishment model has been used against minority groups include use of the “clobber texts” against the LGBT community and the use of the “crime” of Ham from Genesis 9:18-28 to justify slavery of persons from Africa.
atonement theory is an interesting one, though for wider use it might need clarification and tweaking for Western Christianity.
Chapter Ten

Julian of Norwich

Another alternative model of the atonement can be found in the *Revelation of Divine Love* of Julian of Norwich. Not much is known about Julian of Norwich other than she was a fourteenth century anchoress attached to the church in Norwich.\(^{190}\) Her writings are part of the medieval female mystical tradition. Her visions, the *Revelations of Divine Love*, or *Showings*, came about after a near-death experience at the age of 30. It was after this grave illness that she became an anchoress and spent the next twenty years contemplating the visions she has experienced during her illness.\(^{191}\)

The dominant model for the atonement during Julian’s lifetime was Anselm’s substitutionary atonement. As seen earlier, Anselm’s substitutionary atonement is based on the concept that humanity’s sin offends God’s honor so much that there was no other recourse to restore God’s honor than for the God-man, Jesus, to die on the cross to nullify humanity’s sin. Anselm’s view of the relationship between God and humanity is the complete opposite of what Julian presents: “More distinctive are Julian’s contentions that—come what may—Divine love does not let us go but keeps us securely; moreover, that Divine love does not blame us or shame us or show contempt for us when we sin, but eternally plans how to compensate us for our sin with heavenly rewards.”\(^{192}\)


\(^{191}\) McAvoy, *The Satisfied Life*, 12.

This difference in views can be seen with how Anselm and Julian understand the concept of sin. Julian’s framework of sin differs from Anselm in that “Anselm follows Augustine in representing Adam’s fall as an act of rebellion. But in the Parable of the Lord and the Servant, Julian sees the servant fall headlong in clumsy eagerness to please by doing the lord’s will.”

Rather than seeing humanity’s actions as the rebellion of mature beings, Julian instead views humanity as being like children—doing our best, but still making a mess ourselves and the world around us—and Mother Jesus cleaning us up and helping us to mature and grow.

For Julian, there is no anger or wrath on God’s part: “For I saw no wrath except on man’s side, and he [God] forgives that in us, for wrath is nothing else but a perversity and an opposition to peace and to love. And it comes from a lack of power or a lack of wisdom or a lack of goodness, and this lack is not in God, but is on our side.” Adams argues “Holy Church [the church of Rome] teaches that God meets sin with Divine wrath, which must punish us if it doesn’t forgive us. But Julian sees no wrath in God and so—insofar as she understands forgiveness as the putting away of wrath—no forgiveness either. God does not accuse us; God excuses us. God does not condemn us, but plans to compensate us with heavenly rewards.”

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Julian sets out her model of the atonement in the form of a story of a lord and his servant: “The lord sits in state, in rest and in peace. The servant stands before his lord, respectfully, ready to do his lord’s will. The lord looks on his servant very lovingly and sweetly and mildly. He sends him to a certain place to do his will. Not only does the servant go, but he dashes off and runs at great speed, loving to do his lord’s will.” For Julian, humanity, symbolized by the servant, is working with the Lord, God, not against God. Julian’s understanding of humanity as children who try their best but still make mistakes can be seen as she continues, “And soon he falls into a dell and is greatly injured; and then he groans and moans and tosses about and writhes, but he cannot rise or help himself in any way. And of all this, the greatest hurt which I saw him in was lack of consolation, for he could not turn his face to look on his loving lord, who was very close to him, in whom is all consolation…” It is humanity’s desire to rush headlong into trying to please God that causes humans to stray from what God wants of us. When humanity has fallen in the dell, far too often does humanity forget that they have God with them always, because they are so worried about having failed.

Julian continues, “…and all this time his lord looks on him most tenderly, and now with a double aspect, one outward, very meekly and mildly, with great compassion and pity…and the other was inward, more spiritual. And this was shown with a direction of my understanding toward the lord…” For Julian, even when humanity has failed, God still loves humanity as much as before humanity failed: “Then this courteous lord

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197 Julian of Norwich  *Showings* LT 51.

198 Julian of Norwich  *Showings* LT 51.

199 Julian of Norwich   *Showings* LT 51.
said this: See my beloved servant, what harm and injuries he has had and accepted in my service for my love, yes, and for his good will. Is it not reasonable that I should reward him for his fright and his fear, his hurt and his injuries and all his woe?"\(^{200}\) Even when humanity has failed in the task given them, and failed to realize God is always present, God wishes to reward humanity for all the suffering they have undergone in doing the work they were given to do. But what reward does God give humanity? “And furthermore, is it not proper for me to give him a gift, better for him and more honourable [sic] than his own health could have been? Otherwise it seems to me that I should be ungracious.”\(^{201}\) The gift given to humanity, that is better and more honorable, was Jesus. He was the ultimate gift for humanity.

Adams sums up Julian’s atonement theory in this way: “Like the servant in the parable, our fall into sin weakens and blinds us to the point that we almost forget what we were about. We lack—and throughout our lives in this world will continue to lack—the strength and skill to bring our lower nature up to the level of our higher nature. Julian sees that we will continue to sin all of our lives.”\(^{202}\) Adams also places Julian’s theory in relation to the other theories of the era:

Moreover, Julian appears to regard this imputed lovability and worth as underwritten by Christ’s hardest possible work. She does not pause to tell us which (if any) traditional theories she is endorsing. With Holy Church she can say that the passion of Christ buys us out of hell or that hell is thereby harrowed of the souls that are his, which hints at a Ransom Theory (where Christ’s suffering and death pays the devil a ransom for sinners). Her insistence with Holy Church that the Fiend is overcome by Christ’s passion could suggest a Christus Victor theme

\(^{200}\) Julian of Norwich *Showings* LT 51.

\(^{201}\) Julian of Norwich *Showings* LT 51.

\(^{202}\) Adams, “Julian of Norwich,” 441.
(where the cross is a contest—in Julian’s era, a jousting match—between Christ and the devil). Her comment that Christ takes on Himself all of our blame, might even seem to anticipate Luther’s Glorious Exchange (where faith is a reciprocal trade of our guilt for Christ’s righteousness), except that she doesn’t say that in taking our blame Christ makes it His own.²⁰³

Adams argues that Julian does not endorse one specific model for atonement, yet one can argue that her understanding encompasses numerous models. However, because all of these models are nothing but theories, by “borrowing” from models such as ransom theory or Christus Victor, Julian in fact is creating a new theory, a new distinct model for atonement that is closely connected to and shaped by her theology of sin and the relationship between God and humanity.

For Julian, God does all this for humanity because God wants the best for us and realizes that we do not always know what is best: “Yes, I even saw that our Lord rejoices with pity and compassion over the tribulations of his servants…and he does this to prevent the harm which they might have from the pomps and the pride and the vainglory of this wretched life, and to prepare their way to come to heaven, into endless, everlasting bliss.”²⁰⁴

Julian’s theory for the atonement has a number of strong points. First it operates on an understanding of sin similar to the Eastern Orthodox in that humanity is viewed as immature rather than intrinsically sullied. It is also strong in that it is a narrative, which is easy to remember, versus a theory full of complex, difficult to define words.

²⁰³ Adams, “Julian of Norwich,” 440-441.

²⁰⁴ Julian of Norwich Showings LT 28.
Chapter Eleven

Womanist Theology

Another alternate model of the atonement can be found in womanist theology. Womanist theology sits at the intersection of two branches of liberation theology, black theology and feminist theology:

Although the latter-day African American male theologians emphasized black liberation, the biblical stories and interpretive traditions they used likewise highlighted masculine experience. Their counterpart in the feminist movement focused on women’s liberation, viewing the Bible through the lenses of their experience as white, middle-class women and as mothers. Thus, as black women began to study theology, all of the available theological paradigms were models of empowerment for whites and/or men, and not necessarily for black women and men and their children. Nevertheless, womanist theologians today acknowledge their ideological indebtedness to black and feminist liberationists.205

This complex social location of womanist theology—one of oppression and struggle—extends to Womanist theologians’ view of Christology and atonement. This can be seen when Kelly Delaine Brown writes: “…a womanist interpretation of Jesus Christ must confront those understandings of Jesus which have often aided and abetted the oppression of black women. A womanist Christology must also affirm black women's faith that Jesus has supported them in their struggles to survive and be free.”206 This understanding that Jesus has supported black women in their struggle has brought to the fore in womanist theology a critique of many of the common theories for the atonement—ones such as substitutionary atonement that center around the concept that a sinful humankind has

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been saved because Jesus died on the cross in the stead of humans, taking their sinfulness upon himself.\textsuperscript{207} Instead of centering atonement on a substitutionary, or surrogacy, model, many womanist theologians center their atonement theology on the concepts of divine co-sufferer and perfect minister.

The model of Jesus as divine co-sufferer centers on the concept that “[i]n the experience of black people, Jesus was ‘all things.’ Chief among these however was the belief in Jesus as the divine co-sufferer, who empowers them in situations of oppression. For Christian black women in the past, Jesus was their central frame of reference.”\textsuperscript{208} For Jacquelyn Grant, this concept can be summed up in the understanding that the fact “... that Jesus Christ was born, lived, struggled and died among the poor was an affirmation that his ultimate victory was theirs to appropriate.”\textsuperscript{209} This model of Jesus as co-sufferer draws on Jesus’ discussion in Matthew 25 about the “least of these” and connecting this to the thought that “the least in America are literally and symbolically present in Black people,” especially black women.\textsuperscript{210} This, then, is expanded on by Grant through what Jesus does for the least in society:

For as the resurrection signified that there is more to life than the cross of Jesus Christ, for Black women it signifies that their tri-dimensional oppressive existence is not the end, but it merely represents the context in which a particular

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{207} Delores Williams, \textit{Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 162.
\item\textsuperscript{209} Terrell, \textit{Power in the Blood}, 109.
\item\textsuperscript{210} Grant, “Womanist Theology,” 208.
\end{footnotes}
people struggle to experience hope and liberation. Jesus Christ thus represents a
three-fold significance; first he identifies with the "little people," Black women,
where they are; secondly, he affirms the basic humanity of these, "the least"; and
thirdly, he inspires active hope in the struggle for resurrected, liberated
existence. 211

This understanding of Jesus coming to black women where they are—in the midst of
their suffering—does not romanticize their suffering. Instead, it brings hope and
liberation to the downtrodden. This understanding of Jesus’ suffering can be seen in
direct contrast to the model of suffering that is supported in the substitutionary models
prevalent in common-held theological thought. Rather than stating that they should bear
their suffering because Christ suffered for humanity, this model flips it on its head,
stating that Jesus suffers in solidarity to those affected by structural sin and that through
his work, Jesus will bring an end to suffering in the Kingdom.

This is then set into a modern setting in the writings of JoAnne Marie Terrell:
“With all women, black women still die daily on the cross of sexism and the issues
particular to it, including physical domination, economic injustice, political
marginalization and jeopardized reproductive rights—debates over which impugn the
capacity of women to be full moral and social agents, the associated deprivations of
which undermine the ability of women to participate fully in the imagining and
construction of their own lives.” 212 These debates are common among a diverse spectrum
of women, but are even more present for black women because of the added layer of
structural racism. But through the model of Jesus as co-sufferer, the humanity and dignity
of black women is affirmed and restored.


212 Terrell, Power in the Blood, 100.
Through all this structuring of atonement in the model of Jesus as co-sufferer, what is stressed in the corresponding Christology is “the deeds of the historical Jesus and not the idealized Christ in keeping with the liberative traditions of the religious community.” Christians teach that the historical Jesus was a human in all things save sin, understanding suffering—he was defiled and ridiculed on the cross at Golgotha. Just as the humanity and dignity of Jesus was restored at his resurrection, through Jesus’ resurrection the humanity and dignity of black women is restored. In this view, Christ’s humanity is exulted.

Another common model for the atonement in womanist theology is that of Jesus as perfect minister. Jesus is the perfect minister in that “…Jesus came to show humans life—to show redemption through a perfect ministerial vision of righting relationships between body (individual and community), mind (of humans and tradition) and spirit.” This is a very powerful image in a world full of broken relationships, both between humans and between humanity and creation around us.

This ministerial vision is demonstrated through Jesus’ work and miracles as found in the Gospels: “A female-male inclusive vision, Jesus’ ministry of righting relationships involved raising the dead (those separated from life and community), casting out demons (for example, ridding the mind of destructive forces prohibiting the flourishing of positive, peaceful life) and proclaiming the word of life that demanded the transformation of tradition so that life could be lived more abundantly.” Along with demonstrating the

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214 Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 164-165.

215 Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 165.
actual scenarios present in the narratives, these examples can be expounded on to include righting all relationships, and inviting all of humanity into this work through God.

Jesus’ work in the world also brings hope to humanity: “The resurrection of Jesus and the kingdom of God theme in Jesus’ ministerial vision provide black women with the knowledge that God has, through Jesus, shown humankind how to live peacefully, productively and abundantly in relationship...Humankind is, then, redeemed through Jesus’ ministerial vision of life and not through his death.”

Through his work, Jesus reverses the effects of sin on the world—and shows those who are greatly affected by these effects of sin that this is not now the world needs to function and that there is a better version of the world— that of the Kingdom of God.

In this theory of the atonement, it is this vision of right relationship that is the atonement rather than Jesus’ death on the cross:

The resurrection of Jesus and the flourishing of God’s spirit in the world as the result of resurrection represent the life of the ministerial vision gaining victory over the evil attempt to kill it. Thus, to respond meaningfully to black woman’s historic experience of surrogacy oppression, the womanist theologian must show that redemption of humans can have nothing to do with any kind of surrogate or substitute role Jesus was reputed to have played in a bloody act that supposedly gained victory over sin and/or evil.

This theory of the atonement builds off Abelard’s moral exemplar model in that it is Jesus’ life and work play the major role in atonement. For womanist theologians the part

\[216\] Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness, 167.

\[217\] Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness, 165.
that matters is the restoration of relationship—not the “bloody act that supposedly gained victory over sin and/or evil.”

In the case of both the model of divine co-sufferer and the model of perfect minister, one of the points of contention from traditional models of the atonement that is being refuted is the image of surrogacy, a theme that resonates with womanist theologians. This theme of surrogacy is used as one demonstration of structural sin of the exploitation of women. When womanist theologians speak of surrogacy, they are referring to two distinctive types—coerced surrogacy and voluntary surrogacy. Coerced surrogacy, belonging to the antebellum period, “...was a condition in which people and systems more powerful than black people forced black women to function in roles that ordinarily would have been filled by someone else.” Voluntary surrogacy can be contrasted with coerced in that the black woman has the ability to say no to the surrogacy, though often, societal pressures make this neigh on impossible. Regardless of the type of surrogacy, it acts as a visible manifestation of structural sin.

Womanist theologians connect these understandings of surrogacy into how they view the Godhead and Jesus: “Surrogacy has raised concern in feminist and womanist discourse over the nature of the relationship between God and Christ, inciting a controversy that poises several issues of grave concern for traditional theories of the

218 Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 165.

219 Womanist theologians such as Williams use the concept in connection with the story of Hagar and the story of her exploitation. For further discussion, see Williams.

220 Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 60.

221 Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 61.
Atonement which purport that God required Jesus’s death. These include the ransom and satisfaction theories which synergized in the substitution theories of Protestant reformers.”222 This is an issue in light of how the concept of God requiring Jesus’ death parallels with coerced surrogacy that then can be reflected back on society to the detriment of black women.

Along with leading womanist theologians to have concerns about traditional models of the atonement, the image of surrogacy has also led them towards an embodied theology: “All these phenomena provide the seedbed of womanist Christological reflection, having left black woman with little choice but to develop theological perspectives that pertained to their need for bodily redemption. The development of this crucial insight on embodied theology would become especially important for black lesbians, who had been stratified out of any consideration as partners in theological and social discourse with heterosexual women and men.”223 This embodied theology allows the affirmation of black women’s humanity as discussed in the model of Jesus as co-sufferer.

Overall, while womanist theologians have many critiques of traditional atonement models, they hold that these models do have their uses:

While these ransom, satisfaction, substitution and moral theories of atonement may not be serviceable for providing an acceptable response to African-American women’s question about redemption and surrogacy, they do illustrate a serviceable practice for theologians attempting today to respond to this question. That practice (as shown by the theologians above) is to use the language and sociopolitical thought of the time to render Christian ideas and principles understandable. So the womanist theologian uses the sociopolitical thought and


action of the African-American woman’s world to show black women their salvation does not depend upon any form of surrogacy made sacred by traditional and orthodox understandings of Jesus’ life and death. \(^{224}\)

By allowing for the traditional models to still have value in some cases, womanist theologians are providing a space for discussion on how the models of the atonement function in different settings and within different groups. The topic of atonement is especially fitting for this as it is of the areas of theology where there is no set doctrine—meaning that the discussion will not revolve around who is right or wrong, but instead around what model works best for each group involved. This space for discussion across branches of theology allows both for a strengthening of the individual branches, but also for a strengthening of theology in general.

Also, this critique of atonement delineates womanist theology from that of black liberation theology in a distinct way: “Most treatments of redemption in black liberation theology do not raise questions about Christian notions of atonement...The critique of atonement views by womanist theology invites black liberation theologians to begin serious conversations with black females about the black Christians’ understanding of atonement in light of African-American women’s experience with oppression.”\(^{225}\)

\(^{224}\) Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 164.

\(^{225}\) Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 167-168.
Chapter Twelve

A Proposed Atonement Theory

After examining, comparing, and contrasting a variety of atonement theories, each with positive and negative aspects, the atonement theory proposed is a combination of three atonement theories discussed above and supported by a number of biblical passages. The atonement theories used in this combination theory consist of a combination of Abelard, Cheng, and womanist theology: Abelard and his discussion of the role of love in atonement; Cheng’s discussion of sin as denying what God wants of us; and womanist understanding of the role of structural sin in the world. The Bible passages used for support come from the gospel of John: John 1:3-4, John 3:17, and John 15:1-17.

This combination theory removes many of the troublesome elements present in various atonement theories, such as the issues surrounding the crime-punishment model of sin; the concept of penal substitutionary atonement; and a lack of discussion about communal and structural sin. By using Cheng’s model of sin—sin as a rejection of the radical love of God and the “shame, or refusal to be lifted up and to take our rightful place as people who are made in the image and likeness of God” as was discussed earlier—the issues connected to the crime-punishment model of sin are eliminated.\footnote{Cheng, Radical Love, 73.}

The use of Abelard’s moral exemplar atonement theory over (and to some extent, against) Anselm’s substitutionary atonement theory by its mere nature removes itself from the context of Christ-as-substitution that can be read as Christ-forced-to-be-substitution. Instead, by using Abelard’s theory in this compound atonement theory, it
allows for a more well-rounded theory—Christ’s death acts as the final act in his work as a morel example for all of humanity. It is the act that effects a change in humanity, allowing humanity to more fully realize God’s love and charity for humanity, and the full extent of God’s righteousness. It also for a broadening of the concept of atonement from a single point in time, to a broader event, encompassing the Incarnation and Christ’s ministry to a greater extent, while still having a focus on the cross.

The concept of a lack of discussion about communal and/or structural sin is an issue that can be found with many atonement theories. It can be easy to reduce atonement down to a discussion of humanity as a group of individual persons in one-on-one relationship with God. One benefit inherent to including the womanist atonement theory is its focus on communal and structural sin. This focus on sin beyond the individual level allows for a broader, more encompassing understanding of atonement, an understanding that is thoroughly needed in the world. Communal and structural sin surrounds us and is built into the world in which we live. A portion of the sin that Christ’s atoning act releases humanity from is structural sin, and thus structural sin should constitute at least a portion of any discussion of sin connected to the atonement.

One of the biblical lenses through which this atonement theory can be viewed is John 15:1-17, the story of the vine and the branches.\textsuperscript{227} The pericope consists of two

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\textsuperscript{227} “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is
parts, first an extended metaphor laying out the relationship between God and humanity, and, second, Christ explaining to the disciples why he is telling them the extended metaphor found in the first half. In the densely packed, metaphor-laden first half of the pericope (verses 1-8), the relationship between God and humanity is laid out: Christ is the true vine and all of humanity are branches attached to the true vine. It is through Christ that humanity bears good fruit, which glorifies God.

All that is discussed in the first half of the pericope is possible because of the second half of the pericope (verses 9-17). This second half focuses on God’s love for humanity: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love” (John 15:9). It is this “abiding in my love” that allows for any of the first half of the pericope to occur. Jesus explains that to in his love is to love your neighbor just as Christ has loved you. This love of neighbor is just one of the fruits that humanity as the branches can bear in the world—but it is only though the love of God and being chosen by Christ (verse 16) that humanity can bear this fruit that will last.

All the imagery from this pericope can be connected to an atonement theory pulling from Abelard, Cheng, and womanist theology. This atonement theory begins with

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glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”
understanding and defining sin as rejection of radical love. One way in which the concept of sin as a rejection of the radical love of God can be seen is through the lens of John 15:12—Christ’s commandment is that we love one another just as Christ has love us—which we have not done. This inability or unwillingness to love our neighbor as Christ has loved us is a rejection of the radical love of God—a radical love that wants humanity to love one another to as great an extent as God loves humanity.

Despite having rejected the radical love of God, humanity is still presented with this ultimate love—a love that, as described in the next verse, is so encompassing that, as a demonstration it to all humanity, for all time, Christ lays down his life for the sake of his friends—all of humanity: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). As seen above, this passage is one of the core passages in Abelard’s moral exemplar theory. And yet, even in death, the love of God is being shown: “‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him’” (John 3:17).

Since Christ died for us and saved us, all of humanity is given the gift of grace which allows us to grow closer to what God created us to be: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). It is only through God—Christ abiding in us—that humanity can accomplish anything. Christ abiding in humanity through the grace given by his atoning death allows for humanity to bear fruit—to be able to be more of what God created us to be—to be able to love one another as Christ loves us. It is in no way humanity’s work—it is only through God that this is accomplished. This loving one another is one of the ways that humanity can bear fruit that will last.
Christ’s example also points to the structural sin present in the world. All of the -isms that humanity deals with every day—racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, etcetera—are examples of humanity’s not embodying what God created us to be—rejecting the radical love of God. Humanity sets the groups affected by the -isms present in the world apart, as other. Throughout Jesus’ ministry, Jesus interacts with those society considers “other”—women, tax collectors, Samaritans—and treated them with respect and dignity. Rather than worrying about being “contaminated” by the other or thought less of by standing with the other, living into the radical love of God standing with the “other” and treating all people with dignity and respect.

Part of living into the radical love of God also includes combating structures of oppression through love and charity through power given through Christ: “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” We are not attempting to accomplish this lofty goal on our own—we have the power of God on our side as we work to bear good fruits.

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Conclusion

Because of both the multiple layers of meaning connected to the word “atonement” and the fact that the atonement must be viewed through the lens of theory and imagery, it can be seen that there is no one theory of the atonement that works for all and is flawless. This wide variety of theories and concepts allows for both a wider breadth of theological viewpoints to be represented, but also allows for a “cross-pollination” of a sort, allowing theories to affect one another and ebb and surge in response to the popularity of another theory, all in the attempt to reach a theological equilibrium.

The predominance of the Anselmian theory of substitutionary atonement in the Western Christianity gave rise to the reemergence of the supposed “nonviolent” theories, including the Abelardian moral influence theory and Gustaf Aulén’s Christus Victor models. Both of these models’ claim to nonviolence rely on the fact that the death of Christ is not seen as being a substitution of Christ’s life for that of humanity—not the elimination of Christ’s death on the cross from the picture. They are also seen as non-violent in that any violence present cannot be laid at the feet of God the Father—and yet there is violence in the fact that Christ died on a cross. Because of this continued connection to Christ’s death, in addition to other aspects, they are still violent and the best that these theories can be called is less violent atonement theories—not nonviolent atonement theories.

Both Cheng’s use of theosis and Julian of Norwich’s theory of the lord and the servant approach the concept of atonement with a view of sin as immaturity. For Cheng, humanity can grow and mature out of this immaturity, subsequently becoming closer to
God. For Julian, we are the children of God—with all the childish behavior that goes with it—and humanity need only realize that our Lord, Jesus Christ, is right there with us through all our difficulties, trying to help us, and we need only realize it. In both cases, it is not that humanity does anything to save itself, but rather realized what God has done for humanity.

While there is violence present in both these theories, the violence is caused by the fallen nature of the world acting upon humanity, rather than any violence present in the actual atonement. The womanist theory of the atonement still contains violence, but acknowledges the violence and attempts to frame itself in a way to reduce the violence as much as physically possible. The womanist atonement theory also provides a strong look at the role or structural sin in an atonement theory.

It can also be seen that some of these theories can be more troublesome than others—especially Anselm’s substitutionary atonement and its connection—at least culturally—with troublesome behavior against women and other minority populations. Even the alternatives theories that have been presented here are not flawless—but nothing could be flawless with regards to a limited human language attempting to describe the actions and motivations of God—who is beyond comprehension.

The theory proposed is not a perfect theory. It is still connected to violence, though far less than many theories. It provides a model of sin that looks at both individual sin and structural sin, and discusses how both are addressed in the atonement theory. This theory might not work for every person at every time, but it hopefully works for a least a portion of humanity and provokes thought.
One thing that can be seen in common with all the theories of the atonement presented here is that they all—in greater or lesser part—fulfill the definition of violence presented earlier. There is no such thing as a nonviolent atonement. At best, all that can be found is a less violent theory for the atonement. The world of the early twenty-first century is a world ensnared by violence. Whether it is war, uprisings and revolutions, high-profile murder cases, or terrorist attacks, it can be difficult at times to even see the news without hearing of violence of one manner or another. For some ensnared in the violence of the world—whether by structural sin or other means—the concept that even the atonement—a doctrine of unity—might be ensnared in violence as well can be disheartening. By looking at nonviolent atonement theories, alternate theories that might work better for those in these situations can appear. We live in a fallen world and, because of this, even our discussion of being saved from our fallen nature is tainted by our fallen nature—in this case violence.
Bibliography


