



The Atonement

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1: Introduction

"Atonement" is an unusual word. We don't use it much in everyday conversation. The noun and its verb, *to atone*, appear about 100 times in the Old Testament, most often in the context of sacrifice. The equivalent Greek verb and nouns are used a mere six times in the New Testament. The ESV does

not even use *atonement/atone* in the NT, but instead speaks of *propitiation*, hardly a more common word in everyday language (more on these terms at the end).

This illustrates that the importance of a term does not necessarily depend on its frequency. The subject we address when we add the article to the noun and speak of “the atonement” is huge; it is as big as the gospel. So what are we talking about?

What Are We Talking About?

The atonement is about the cross and the death of Jesus and the meaning this has. In the words of Baker and Green (2011: 53), we are speaking of “the saving significance of Jesus’ death”.

However, to put it like this is both too broad and too narrow – because atonement is an ambiguous word (see Craig 2020: 10-12). Its meaning can be as narrow as *to deal with (or atone for) our sin*, something much more limited in scope than salvation or even the cross; the latter may accomplish several things beyond atonement in this strict sense.

On the other hand, atonement is also used broadly in the sense of reconciliation with God. Either way, broad or narrow, we may want to include the incarnation and the life of Jesus as much as his death, and his resurrection and his ascension as well. After all, his death means nothing without his life. It means little without the resurrection and his ascension to heaven, where he intercedes for us from a position of power at the right hand of God.

Perhaps for this reason, Eddy and Beilby (2006: 9) in their introduction to four views of the atonement offer an even broader definition than Baker and Green: “the saving work of Jesus Christ”. This is so broad as to hardly makes sense; salvation and atonement are not synonyms.

My focus is going to be on the narrow end of this spectrum: in what way(s) does Jesus’ death on the cross make atonement? But the various effects and meanings of the life and death of Jesus are not easily kept separate from each other.

Still: the death of Christ is obviously central; it is for good reason that the cross has become the predominant symbol of the Christian faith.

That the death of Christ is of enormous importance was clear to the church from its beginning. This conviction precedes the faith of Paul, who came to believe in Jesus only a few years after it had happened, as can be seen in this verse, showing it was in place perhaps from day 1: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3 ESV).

Christ died for our sins. What does that mean? How does Jesus’ death do anything about our sin and why did it require his gruesome execution on a Roman cross?

The gospel of atonement by God incarnate remains the best news in the world.
(Davidson 2017: 56)

Multiple Facets

According to a common explanation, one that you have probably heard, Jesus took upon himself the punishment for our sins; he died in our place, as our substitute. This view is often called penal substitution. It has been the most widespread explanation in the churches following the Reformation. However, it is not the only view, and in our days, penal substitution has many critics.

I will write about these alternatives in a later issue, but for now, I want to point out that there is room for more than one explanation. It is to be expected that one explanation will not do to cover everything the cross accomplished:

- We use many images for God: he is (like a) father, king, lord, shepherd, mother, guide, saviour, light etcetera. We need all of these and more to even begin to grasp what God is like.

- The human predicament is multifaceted as well: sin, death, guilt, spiritual blindness, physical illness, shame, depression and other psychological disorders, bondage, broken relationships, hostility, evil, lostness, and more. The three most prominent facets of sin and its consequences may be guilt, defilement, and estrangement. For the atonement in a broad sense to be effective, it will have to deal with all of these. Atonement in a narrow sense must at least resolve guilt and defilement, thus making reconciliation between us, God, and others possible.
- The Bible itself uses multiple images to speak of the atonement. Baker and Green (2011: 41, 123) speak of “five constellations of images”,

borrowed from the public life of the ancient Mediterranean world: the court of law (e.g., justification), the world of commerce (e.g., redemption), personal relationships (e.g., reconciliation), worship (e.g., sacrifice) and the battleground (e.g., triumph over evil). Within these categories are clusters of terms, leading us to the conclusion that the significance of Jesus’ death could not be represented without remainder by any one concept or theory of metaphor.

One could add the world of medicine with the language of healing and disease. Likely, then, next to multiple images and metaphors, we will have to use several models to grapple with the atonement. However, I do not agree with Joel Green that this leads us to a kaleidoscopic view (2006). A kaleidoscope changes randomly; it is too post-modern an image for my taste. Rather, I believe we should think of the atonement as a multifaceted reality.

In what follows, I will say a bit more about these images; they give us a first impression of how rich and deep a subject the atonement is.

And to sum up, the successes of the Saviour, brought about by His Incarnation, are of such kind and magnitude that, if one wished to go through them all, it would be like those who gaze at the expanse of the sea and try to count its waves.
(Athanasius 1903: 143; Incarnation LIV)

Multiple Images

Sacrifice. The most common way to speak of the atonement both in the NT and in the post-apostolic age is the atonement as sacrifice. Terms like *propitiation*, *cleansing*, *washing*, and *(making) atonement* in a narrower sense all have their origin in the sacrificial world of tabernacle and temple, as do all references to the blood of Jesus. “The New Testament mentions the ‘blood of Christ’ three times as often as his ‘cross’ and five times as often as his ‘death’” (Rogers 2017: 403).

How do blood and sacrifice deal with sin or impurity? This question is not explicitly discussed in the NT or in the church fathers. It was a given to them that sacrifice accomplished this. Unfortunately, it is not a given to us. We will have to return to this question later.

Punishment. Especially in Romans and Galatians, Paul uses terminology that is legal or, to be more precise, forensic (that is, relating to a court of law). This includes the ideas of condemnation, judgment, and punishment, and of course that crucial term *justification*, one of the outcomes of the atonement. Justice systems therefore provide parallels and words to speak of the atonement.

Redemption. “The Son of Man came ... to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45 ESV). Some metaphors are borrowed from the world of commerce. Words like *redemption*, *purchase*, and *ransom* sound like a financial transaction; there is a price to be paid. Frequently, the background is that of the slave market. It can also be the OT institution of redemption of a person or his property by a next-of-kin. It should be noticed that Scripture never identifies a recipient of what is ‘paid’ in the atonement. It is, after all, a metaphor, a partial and incomplete parallel between the world of humans and the activities of God. It is not used in its original, literal meaning. To redeem or to ransom means to set free.

This kind of language is already used for the exodus, in which God redeemed Israel. It is quite clear that no one received any payment from God:

But it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Dt. 7:8 ESV; such redemption language is especially frequent in the second half of Isaiah)

Reconciliation. The world of human relationships also provides terminology to speak of the atonement. Reconciliation is one such term, and perhaps the idea of forgiveness has its origin in the personal sphere as well. When Paul speaks of reconciliation in Romans 5:11f, it appears he adds something new to what he has covered so far. Through the atonement, God does more than acquit us, even more than declare our status to be righteous. He aims for (and the cross accomplishes) full relational restoration, in one word: reconciliation. We don't need to fear God anymore, for all grounds for anger and judgment have been cancelled out. And our hostility is countered and defused by Christ lovingly dying for us.

Victory. The death of Jesus, especially in combination with his resurrection, was a resounding victory. It makes sense to portray it as a triumph over sin, death, and the powers of evil (e.g. Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14; John 12:31). The cross is the climax and a decisive turning point in Satan's war against God.

It is noteworthy that Paul uses three of these images in one dense sentence in Romans 3:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are **justified** by his grace as a gift, through the **redemption** that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a **propitiation** by his blood, to be received by faith. (Rom. 3:23-25a ESV; emphasis added)

In another dense statement, he combines commercial, legal, and battle imagery:

And you ... God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (Col. 2:13-15 ESV)

The "record of debt", a certificate of indebtedness, was a commercial and legal document, a formal IOU. It is wiped out through the cross. Since it is nailed to the cross, it doubles as the formal indictment against us, listing our crimes. This suggests that Jesus' death functions as a legal execution; he died because of our crimes. At the same time (perhaps because of this, that is, by dealing with our transgressions), he triumphs over the powers of this world.

The imagery associated with the atonement, then, is diverse. However, it is likely that many of these images point in a similar direction. We owe a debt, deserve legal punishment, are under a curse, need healing, and are defiled and in need of purification. The language varies, but the underlying reality at least points in a similar direction.

Obviously, Paul had no qualms mixing his metaphors. He presents a multifaceted understanding of the atonement.

The result has been unexpectedly rich. I thought I understood the doctrine of the atonement; indeed, I have taught on the subject. But I had no idea of the depths of fresh insight that the study would bring. As I delved into the doctrine of Christ's atonement – biblically, historically, philosophically – new understanding has been the reward. (Craig 2018a: Preface)

Appendix 1: The English Word *Atonement*

Atonement is difficult to define as a theological term, largely because our definition will depend on our understanding of it. To give a thing a name is often to predetermine its meaning: a name comes with

a bias. Therefore, it is a blessing to have this slightly archaic word in English. It works well as a technical term for our subject, one we can all use, even when we understand the mechanism differently.

It is a unique word. *Atonement* is “one of the few theological terms that is ‘wholly and indigenously English’” (Eddy and Beilby 2006: 9). The word originally had a meaning close to *reconciliation* (‘at-one-ment’). *Reconciliation* is still one of its meanings.

However, *atonement* often has a cultic ring to it, not a relational one, and it implies something formal and substantial must be done to make reconciliation possible. In this sense, it is something distinct from reconciliation, something that precedes it. The biblical words that are translated (even if not in every translation) with *atonement*, *to atone*, or *to make atonement* all have this narrower meaning; they do *not* mean *reconciliation* or *to reconcile*.

In the OT, *to atone* is not a bad translation because it leaves the mechanism open: does the sacrifice purge, cleanse, expiate, annul, cancel, remove sin/defilement/impurity? Or does it appease, placate, propitiate, satisfy God? (The Hebrew word *kipper* is notoriously difficult to translate.) Probably both – beware of false dichotomies – even if not in every instance: on the one hand, atonement is made for sin(s) or for people, implying *they* are changed. On the other hand, the atoning sacrifice is offered *to God*. And some of the sacrifices are a pleasing aroma to the Lord, indicating a change in his attitude, which fits the concept of propitiation or appeasement.

“To make atonement” avoids having to make a translation decision that may be wrong and that would certainly bias the discussion. And either way, the outcome is the same: what is done makes someone acceptable again to appear before God.

The situation is different in the Greek NT. The Greek words used (more on them in the next section) have their original setting in the worship of the gods. In that context, they stand for appeasement and gaining favor. It is probably for this reason that the ESV avoids using *atonement* and instead translates *propitiation*. This removes the ambiguity but stirs up theological controversy: is Christ’s death propitiation or expiation?

Appendix 2: Propitiation and Expiation

More words we hardly use in normal language! They stand for a perennial debate in English theology. Should we think of the sacrifice of Christ as a propitiation or as an expiation? And what is the difference?

First, the relevant Greek terms used in the NT. As mentioned earlier, they are rare. The verb *hilaskomai* appears in Luke 18:13 and Heb. 2:17; the noun *hilasmos* in 1 John 2:2 and 4:10.

A related noun, *hilasterion*, is used in Heb. 9:5, where it refers to the cover of the ark of the covenant, also known as mercy seat, and in Rom. 3:25, where the exact meaning is much debated. Is Christ our mercy seat, that is, a place or a means to ‘make atonement’? Or does it mean either propitiation or expiation? And how do these two terms differ from each other?

Here is one attempt to explain the difference:

Expiation refers to a sacrifice that wipes away or covers from sight that which offends. The object of expiation is nonpersonal. Propitiation refers to a sacrifice which turns away wrath of the person. The object of propitiation is an offended moral agent. N. T. Wright captures the difference well: “You propitiate a person who is angry; you expiate a sin, crime, or stain on your character” (Cole 2017: 498, quoting Wright 2002: 476).

And here is a second attempt:

In discussions of the bib[lical] teaching on atonement it has become customary to draw a distinction between propitiation and expiation. The former term indicates that the action is directed toward God or some other offended person. The underlying purpose is to change God’s attitude from one of wrath to one of good-will and favor. In the case of expiation, on the other hand, the action is directed toward that which has caused the breakdown in the

relationship. It is sometimes held that, while God is not personally angry with the sinner, the act of sin has initiated a train of events that can be broken only by some compensatory rite or act of reparation for the offense. In short, propitiation appeases the offended person, whereas expiation is concerned with nullifying the offensive act. (Silva 2014: II, 534)

Objections against propitiation are mainly: (a) a linguistic argument: the way the relevant Greek terms are used in the Septuagint to translate Hebrew atonement terms; (b) it is inappropriate to ascribe wrath and anger to God (something the Bible does rather frequently, it may be noted); and (c) it would mean that God has to be appeased and his favour needs to be 'bought' with gifts, the way the ancient Romans and Greeks did with their gods – an unworthy representation of God.

Putting the argument like this admits something important: the original meaning in normal Greek was precisely what is objected to:

The basic idea behind the religious use of ἱλάσκομαι in the Gk. world is the human effort to dispose in one's own favor the awful and freq. calamitous power of the dead, the demons, and the gods, and to strengthen one's own actions by the assistance of supernatural forces. (Ibid.: II, 532)

However, no one believes the ancient Israelites or the authors of the NT held such a crude notion of 'placating' God with sweet gifts or even of God's wrath as something close to human anger, which is often unreasonable and usually comes with a loss of control. Those who oppose the concept of propitiation should beware of setting up a strawman. That God reacts to evil in a way that has something in common with human anger is not unreasonable; surely, he is not indifferent. But in that case, more is needed than expiation only:

Further analysis makes clear that the authors of the Heb. OT and the LXX translators are far removed from the crude pagan idea of propitiating a capricious and malevolent deity ... There is a personal dimension that affects both the offending and the offended parties: where an offense has to be expiated, the action has to be taken because the personal relationship between the parties requires it. (Ibid.: II, 536)

The linguistic argument is difficult and involves more than a hundred OT passages; I cannot do justice to it here (see *ibid.*: II, 532-7 and Morris 1984: 155ff for an introduction). In summary, I would say that a combination of the two ideas fits best: propitiatory expiation or propitiation through expiation; as Silva puts it:

What C. K. Barrett says of Paul's teaching in Romans might be applied also to those passages in the OT concerning the expiation of human sin: "It would be wrong to neglect the fact that expiation has, as it were, the effect of propitiation: the sin that might have excited God's wrath is expiated (at God's will) and therefore no longer does so" (*The Epistle to the Romans* [1957], 78)." (Silva 2014: II, 536f)

2: Models and Explanations

In the previous issue, I looked at terminology and I introduced five (or six) groups of images or metaphors that illustrate the atonement. It is now time to attempt a more thorough explanation. This is no small endeavour. Studying the atonement makes me feel like I am standing in front of a magnificent building, much larger and far more glorious than the most majestic cathedral. And now I need to describe and explain this building...

But we are small-minded sinners and the atonement is great and vast. We should not expect that our theories will ever explain it fully. Even when we put them all together, we will no more than begin to comprehend a little of the vastness of God's saving deed. (Morris 1984: 102)

Scriptural Signposts

Here is a small selection of relevant Bible passages that may function as pointers to our subject. To put it irreverently, this is the puzzle we are trying to solve. I invite you to contemplate these verses before reading any further. What do these things mean?

Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29)

But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. (Heb. 9:26)

For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins ... And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all ... For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. (Heb. 10:4, 10, 14)

I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered. (Mt. 26:31)

[Christ Jesus] whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Rom. 3:25f)

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:8)

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree". (Gal. 3:13)

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:3f)

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace. (Eph. 1:7)

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (Col. 2:13-15)

... knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. (1 Pet. 1:18f)

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Pet. 2:21-24)

But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned – every one – to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all ...
Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;

he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.
Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities. (Is. 53:5f, 10f)

Models

Often, explanations are offered in the form of models. A model is a simplified description of reality. For the atonement, models are based on presumed parallels between the human world and its practices and God's actions. In other words, they are illustrative and approximate, not exact and real equivalents; see [the influential essay by J. I. Packer \(2019\)](#) on penal substitution for this vital point.

It is common to put the focus on three such models: penal substitution, moral influence or example, and ransom theory or Christus Victor view. They were first distinguished in this way by Gustaf Aulén (2003) in a classic study originally published in 1931. This book is often referred to; I would be hard-pressed to come up with a book on the atonement that does not mention it.

Aulén's book is admirably clear but it has unfortunate sides to it, with far-reaching consequences. First, he treats the three types as mutually exclusive: it is one or the other, either/or, not both/and. Second, his analysis of the church fathers and the early church is skewed and inaccurate. It has led to the myth, widespread today, that for the first one thousand years of its existence, the church held to a Christus Victor understanding. Not so; more on this when we come to the Christus Victor model.

In addition, I would argue that we need more than three ideas to do justice to the cross, more even than I can include here. I will for instance leave out René Girard's scapegoat model, the cross as revelation, and the great reversal that turns social hierarchies upside down (Lk. 1:51-3). None of these truly explain atonement in the narrow sense of the word, but still, they indicate the atonement is big, not small; it is a palace, not a three-room apartment.

I have arranged the explanations I do cover in part chronologically and in part logically, to shape a pathway through the atonement maze that hopefully enables us not to get lost.

"So infinite is the mystery of God's saving work that we need many interpretive images, many tones, many voices" (Baker and Green 2011: 139).

The Language of Sacrifice

The language of sacrifice is by far the most common way the NT speaks about the death of Christ. Whenever his blood is mentioned, which is often, the idea of sacrifice is in the background.

Sacrifice is not normally discussed as a model of the atonement, presumably because it does not explain it (or does it?). It seems to have been self-explanatory back then, which is not true today. It is therefore considered an image rather than a model or theory. Still, because of its prevalence in Scripture, sacrifice needs to be our point of departure.


The image itself is multifaceted. We have the Passover lamb, the blood of which preserved the Israelite firstborn from death. We have both the old and the new covenant initiated by blood. Jesus is explicit about this when he institutes the Lord's supper:

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Mt. 26:27f ESV)

We have the day of atonement in Leviticus 16 with its elaborate ritual. In a highly symbolic manner, it makes visible the need to remove sin and impurity. And we have different types of sacrifice described in the opening chapters of Leviticus. Some are explicitly “to make atonement”. Others have the effect of sanctifying something or someone. Yet a third group serves as a form to celebrate intimate community with God (and others) in the form of a sacrificial meal. There appears to be a sequence here, a three-step process of drawing near to God through sacrifice: remove sin and impurity, sanctify, celebrate communion.

Is it too much to recognize in this the NT theology of justification and sanctification leading to fellowship and union with God – for which the sacrificial death of Christ was essential?

The blood of Jesus, so 1 John 1:7, “cleanses us from all sin”. That is not an explanation but perhaps it communicates the truth more effectively than an explanation could.



But in the middle of [the temple system] is one great governing idea: a sacrifice is something given over into the hands of God, most dramatically when it is a life given over with the shedding of blood. That gift of life or blood somehow casts a veil over the sin or sickness or disorder of an individual or of a whole people. It removes the consequences of sin; it offers the possibility of a relationship unclouded by guilt with God; it is a gift that stands between God and failures or disorders of the world. The gift is given – and it’s a costly gift because it’s about life and blood – so that peace and communication may be re-established between heaven and earth. And this was always symbolized by the fact that the sacrificed animal would be cooked and cut up and shared in the meal, which expressed not only fellowship with one another, but restored fellowship with God. It’s a gift that in the language of the Old Testament turns away the anger and displeasure of God. In the jargon of theology it ‘propitiates’ God, it makes things all right with him again, but also it brings him back into an active relationship with the world. At the highest point, sacrifice establishes – or re-establishes, confirms – the covenant, God’s alliance with God’s people. (Williams 2017: 24f)

The Mechanism of Sacrifice

Still, we want to know more. How does sacrifice ‘work’? What is the mechanism involved? Somehow, it cleanses the worshipper from sin and impurity. It brings about expiation, to use that word again, and, depending on your views, propitiation as well.

But “somehow” is not an explanation. It begs the question: *how* does sacrifice do this? What does it do? Of course, the old answer is that the sacrificial animal dies in the place of the worshipper, as his substitute, taking the consequence of sin. This fits well with the penal substitution model of the atonement (for “consequences”, read *punishment*) – which is why it does *not* sit well with critics of this model.

For them, there is a new way of looking at sacrifice that emphasises life rather than death. For both views, the crucial statement occurs in the second half of Leviticus 17, where the eating of blood is prohibited:

For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. (Lev. 17:11 ESV)

Geoff Holsclaw (2019; emphasis in original) explains it like this:

Many look at Lev. 17:11 as offering blood as a symbol of *life*, rather than the symbol of *death*. The text even says as much, “the life of a creature is in the blood.” If the life is in the blood, then any offering of blood is actually an offering or releasing of life through sacrifice. In this

view blood is offered as a defense against death, or to act as a ritual cleanser to wipe away the effects of sin. In this view God – who is the God of life – is offering life through the sacrificial system as a mean of overcome [sic] the death entering in through sin.

In this view – instead of substituting one death for another death – the idea of sacrifice is to **exchange death for life**.

The death caused by sin is counteracted by life (temporarily, through the imperfect animal sacrifices).

But to say that sacrifice is a “releasing of life” seems absurd. Life is not released but terminated. Yes, my life is released, but at the expense of another life. The net result is indeed, as Holsclaw claims, “to exchange death for life”, but this appears to happen through “substituting one death for another death”, not through a transfer of life from the animal to the worshiper.

Hartmut Gese, one of the originators of this newer view of sacrifice, states: “Cultic, sanctifying atonement is in no sense a negative procedure of removing sin or of penance. It is coming to God by passing through the sentence of death” (Gese 1981: 114). Indeed – but “through the sentence of death” implies punishment, which then enables the second, positive step toward reconciliation. It needs both the negative (removal of sin) and the positive (sanctification).

As pointed out in the previous section, there certainly is such a positive side to sacrifice. Depending on the type of sacrifice, it can serve to sanctify the one bringing the sacrifice, transferring the person from the profane realm to God’s sphere. Sacrifice, then, does more than deal with the consequences of sin, but it definitely does the latter.

And perhaps more importantly, it does both by means of death. The sacrifice of Christ has the same double effect, likewise by means of death (and resurrection). It cleanses/purifies *and* sanctifies/consecrates:

For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins [by implication: the blood of Christ accomplishes precisely this] ... And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Heb. 10: 4, 10 ESV)

Paul’s language for this is that Christ died for us and that at the same time we died with Christ, thereby also sharing in his resurrection (something to which we will return).

A few more points to consider, before we move on:

- When we speak of sins in this context, it cannot refer to the actual sinful actions. They are things of the past and cannot be cleansed by a sacrifice or born by a substitute. “Sins” here must be a metonymy, a related term for, in this case, the *consequences* of those sins. The sins themselves cannot be taken away; but any resulting guilt, impurity, curse, threat of punishment, and further consequences may continue to exist until they are dealt with.
- Sacrifice in the Old Testament is in many cases substitutionary: the laying on of a hand (e.g. Lev. 1:4) indicates the animal represents the one offering it.
- It is often said that to make atonement never has God as its object; atonement is made for sin(s) or for people. Therefore, so the reasoning, it is about expiation, not propitiation. However, in Leviticus, sacrifices are often said to be offerings *to God*. And according to Hebrews 9:14, Jesus “offered himself without blemish to God”.
- Some of the sacrifices in the law are described as a “pleasing aroma”; this indicates they have God as their object and bring about a change in God’s attitude because of the sacrifice; this, too, supports the idea of propitiation.

All of this suggests that the old way of explaining the mechanism of sacrifice may have been at least substantially right after all. That said, I do not think sacrifice can be reduced to (an image of) penal substitution; that would leave too much out. The sacrifice Christ offered is not just his death but also

his life, and it does not only deal with the negative but also establishes a new, positive reality (cf. Heb. 10:19-22: it cleanses not a *guilty* but an *evil* conscience).

The Great Exchange

Although it does not constitute a model of the atonement and does not provide an explanation for its workings, the motif of “the great exchange” must be mentioned here. For one, it is a beautiful summary of what the atonement accomplishes for us. And second, it is widespread in the earliest writings of the church after the NT and can be found in the NT itself as well:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. (2 Cor. 8:9 ESV)

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. 5:21 ESV)

Michael Horton (2018: i, chapter 2) considers this, and not some form of ransom theory or Christus Victor, the consensus view of the church fathers. And Oliver Crisp summarizes the writings of Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130-c. 202) and Athanasius (c. 297-373) on the atonement with this short but powerful line: “*Christ became human that we might become divine*” (Crisp 2020: 47; emphasis in original). A great exchange indeed, and worth pondering.

This is the wonderful exchange which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us with his righteousness. (Calvin 1960: 1362; *Institutes* 4.17.2)



Ransom Theory

Christ’s death is a ransom that obtains our deliverance. It is an overstatement to call this a theory; it may be better to speak of a ransom idea or image. As such, we already touched on it in the previous issue. The ransom idea is widespread in the church fathers and has clear and obvious roots in Scripture.

However, it is important to note a few points about how the church fathers write about it:

- The ransom idea is rarely developed into a fuller explanation.
- It is usually only one component of a much broader understanding of the atonement.
- There is no agreement to whom the ransom was paid – which leaves it somewhat wanting as an explanation, let alone a theory of the atonement.

The latter points to a crucial weakness of redemption or ransom as a full model. It hardly makes sense that God would pay himself to purchase our freedom. So, was the ransom paid to the devil? But why would the devil have any legal rights over humanity, rights of such a nature that God felt obliged to honour them? Isn’t Satan himself a lawless rebel, whose power is based on brute force and deception, not legitimate authority?

In some versions of ransom theory, the devil is tricked into a deal. He accepts Jesus in exchange for humanity, not fully recognizing that Jesus is God in human form or what this implies: he will not be

able to hold Jesus captive in death, either because Jesus is without sin and therefore not liable to death or because of his divine power that overcomes death.

In other versions, Satan is not tricked but simply overreaches his authority. By killing Jesus in blind hatred, he kills an innocent victim, someone who is without sin. He has no right to do so and therefore has overstepped his boundaries, which leads to his losing control over death.

However, it seems strange that God would appoint Satan to supervise and administer the institution of death. What is more, there is no real biblical foundation for such a construct in which the devil is either misled or misjudges. There is only one verse that may be quoted in support of it, 1 Corinthians 2:8:

None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

However, there is no indication in the context of this verse that Paul is thinking of spiritual powers rather than human rulers. The Greek word used here (*archon*) is never used of non-human forces in the NT. The only exception, always in the singular, is its use for either Satan or Beelzebul as the prince or ruler of demons (e.g. Mt. 12:24) or of this world (e.g. John 12:31). Demonic powers themselves are never referred to with this word.

Normally, the word refers to various human authorities. This makes sense in the context of 1 Corinthians 2. Jesus was condemned to death by human authorities: “Our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him” (Lk. 24:20).

Besides, there is no indication that Adam formally relinquished or lost dominion over creation to the devil. Through disobedience he removed himself from God’s protection. Thus, the devil could overwhelm him. But this is usurped authority; there is nothing legitimate about it. Satan is a worse transgressor and offender than humanity.

There is one more option. Was the ransom paid to death? After all, God had said that Adam would die if he ate of the forbidden tree. One could take this as a commitment from God’s side. As a result, something is owed to death. However, even though death is sometimes personified and spoken about in personal terms, it is an abstract concept. God does not owe a debt to death, as if he made a promise or entered into a contractual relationship with death.

It seems better to understand terms like *to redeem* or *to ransom* as metaphors meaning *to liberate* or *to release*. There is a cost (Christ has to die), but no payment (in the sense of a transaction with a recipient). But if redemption is not a model but an image only, it fails to offer a full explanation.



Anselm’s Satisfaction Model

Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033-1109) is arguably the most important voice on the meaning of the atonement between Augustine and Luther. Interestingly, hardly anyone holds his view today, but virtually everyone who writes about the atonement at any length discusses his views – and that more than 900 years after his death.

The reason is that Anselm’s book on the subject turned out to be a milestone in thinking about the atonement. Except for *On the Incarnation* by Athanasius (written before 319), it is perhaps the first thorough and focused systematic treatment of the subject. Its title is *Cur Deus Homo*,

literally meaning “Why a God-man” or “Why God became man”. Why did the atonement require someone who was both God and man?

In his answer, Anselm persuasively rejected any ransom offered to the devil. Instead, something had to be offered to God to make up for the offence against his divine honour (therefore “satisfaction”).

Anselm did not believe that *God* needed this, since God does not need anything. But justice had to be satisfied and the order of the universe had to be restored, either through punishment of the offenders

or through appropriate satisfaction or – to use a more modern word –compensation. Christ did the latter by offering to God a gift as a satisfaction: his selfless death.

Since God is infinite, the offence is infinite and requires a gift of infinite worth to make up for it. No ordinary human could accomplish this, but the divine son born as a human could. He could represent us because he is human, and he could bring infinite satisfaction because he is himself infinite.

All of this is magnificently coherent and logical. I only see one weak spot. It fails to explain why the voluntary death of Jesus was such a wonderful gift and an expression of love, pleasing the Father beyond measure, if it did not actually 'do' something; what kind of a gift is this? What compensatory value does it have?

At any rate, according to Anselm, Christ offered compensation to satisfy the demands of justice. This is different from penal substitution. He did not bear our punishment. However, both views agree on the central importance of justice being satisfied. Anselm thus paved the way for the hegemony of penal substitution that followed the Reformation.



Moral Influence and Example

Obviously, what Christ did both in life and in death functions as an example and is meant to influence how we live; on this, all the models agree. The moral influence model, usually traced back to Peter Abelard (c. 1079-1142), argues that this is the essence of the atonement:

Abelard's primary answer to the atonement question came in the form of a third broad paradigm: The work of Christ chiefly consists of demonstrating to the world the amazing depth of God's love for sinful humanity. The atonement was directed primarily at humanity, not God. There is nothing inherent in God that must be appeased before he is willing to forgive sinful humanity. The problem rather lies in the sinful, hardened human heart, with its fear and ignorance of God. Humanity refuses to turn to God and be reconciled. Through the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ, the love of God shines like a beacon, beckoning humanity to come and fellowship. (Eddy and Beilby 2006: 19)

Abelard has often been misrepresented in this regard. His understanding was broader and certainly not limited to such an exemplarist or moral influence model (Johnson 2017). It became especially important in the 19th century and beyond in liberal theology.

Example or influence? This is more than a difference in names.

If Christ's death is merely taken as an example (that is, it does not actually 'do' or change anything directly), it becomes an impossible burden: how could we possibly live up to this standard? There is no atonement in this.

If Christ's death is understood as an influence, it could be taken to effect atonement in the sense of reconciliation by overcoming human animosity against God by God showing his love for us. But there is no atonement in the sense of expiation (of sin) or propitiation (of God's wrath) involved. And it might be questioned in that case how Christ's dying for us expresses God's love. Why did Jesus have to die? What does it do? How is it love? How did he die *for us*? Perhaps by demonstrating that even the crucifixion will not keep God from loving us, but that is a weak explanation of atonement.

Again, the cross certainly (also) demonstrates the extent of God's love. But as a stand-alone explanation of the atonement moral influence fails to account for it.

Penal Substitution

Penal substitution (except in quotations, I will use the abbreviation PS in this section) is perhaps so well known that it does not need an explanation. I will give one anyway:

Penal substitutionary atonement assumes the logic of the law court. Sin is understood as law-breaking, and so necessarily attracts a penalty, which is inevitably death. In dying on the cross, Jesus pays the penalty of death for all those who are saved, and so they are freed from the deserved punishment. God's justice is satisfied by Jesus's death. (Holmes 2017: 295)

Although traces of this view can be found from early on, it received its full and systematic formulation during the Reformation. It became the dominant explanation among Protestants and evangelicals. However, it has come under pressure: "In recent times no doctrine of the atonement has been so maligned as penal substitution" (Crisp 2020: 96). For this reason, rather than give further explanation, I will focus on criticism and questions surrounding the concept. Is the idea really that bad? I will cover 14 objections, starting with some of the weaker ones.



1. PS is divine child abuse and promotes violence. God is angry because of our sin and punishes his son instead of us. Thus, the cross is divine violence. As such, it validates human violence. It is right to punish! In addition, if the Son's submission to suffering and punishment is laudable, then so is human submission, not least of all that of children and women to their male abusers:

If the best person who ever lived gave his life thus, then, to be of value we should likewise sacrifice ourselves ... Divine child abuse is paraded as salvific and the child who suffers "without even raising a voice" is lauded as the hope of the world. (Brown and Parker 1989: 104)

Presumably because it is provocative and graphic, the charge of divine child abuse is repeated *ad nauseam* in literature on the atonement (e.g. Eddy and Beilby 2006: 9f; Weaver 2011: 5; Horton 2018: 11, 201; Crisp 2020: 7). There is a triple irony here:

1. As pointed out by Williams (2007: 83f), this is not an argument against PS only, but against every view endorsing that Christ suffered according to the purpose of the Father. Christus Victor views fare no better by this standard.
2. God perpetrates none of the violence. God is not the judge who pronounces the verdict. He is not the one who orders the execution. The nails are hammered in by a soldier acting on the command of another ruler.
3. Greg Boyd's version of Christus Victor (2006), which is supportive of the criticism, puts such a strong emphasis on God's warfare against evil that it looks more prone to support violence than a model based on punishment. Don't get me wrong. No such tendency shows in Boyd. But then, neither did J. I. Packer and Leon Morris, two of the most able defenders of PS, beat their wives and oppress their children, as far as I know. The issue is the potential for violence of a model or theory. "God at War" (Boyd 1997) sounds potentially a lot more violent than "the punishment that brought us peace was upon him".

Still, it is possible to abuse the cross as a tool of subjugation that tells victims they need to follow Christ's example and quietly submit to their suffering. PS can be used to justify unjust use of force or authoritarian structures, whether in the family or in society. The remedy for this is not to discard a cross-based atonement but to counter the abuse: woe to those who turn the cross into an instrument of oppression!

2. PS divides and disunites the Trinity. Is there a tension in God, between the Son and the Father, or between his wrath and his mercy? If the Son is trying to overcome the Father's anger, however just, are they therefore working in opposite directions?

By no means. They planned this together, in full agreement. Neither the Son nor the Father is a reluctant partner. According to John 3:16, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son". That Christ "gave himself for our sins" was "according to the will of our God and Father" (Gal. 1:4). If there is a tension, it is between his mercy and his justice, but not between Father and Son.

Bernard [of Clairvaux] saw the cross as reconciling the tension between God's mercy and his truth and justice. Truthfulness requires that we die, mercy that we rise again ... When Christ took our punishment upon himself, justice and peace kissed one another ... The classic text here is Psalm 85:10 (which speaks of mercy and truth meeting, justice and peace kissing), which is much cited by Bernard (Lane 2008: 259)

3. The God of PS is an angry God. This criticism deserves to be taken seriously, not because it is true, but because it is a widespread perception. It has something to do with our communication as Christians. PS claims like "God is personally angry at sin" (Schreiner 2006: 77) may serve to confirm the caricature.

An angry God punishing people – it may be a distortion, but because it is widespread, proponents of PS need to work hard and find better ways to communicate the atonement.

What won't work is to remove wrath as a category that applies to God. That way, we end up with the God of *moralistic therapeutic deism* (the phrase coined by Smith and Denton 2005 to describe the faith of American teenagers) – a feel-good religion in which the cross is little more than a piece of comforting jewellery we wear around our necks.

It is important to make this point. Opponents of PS often complain about how it leads to a distorted picture of an angry and violent God. But there is an opposite picture of a wrathless God that is no less distorted. The study of Smith and Denton proves that it is spreading.

4. How can God be angry if he is love? Well, how can he not be? What kind of love can remain impassive in the face of destructive evil? Precisely because God is love, he cannot be indifferent.

But of course, we need to tread carefully here. Human anger is a very imperfect parallel to divine wrath. Human anger is usually out of control and often unreasonable. God's wrath, on the other hand, is "the reaction of holy love to that which spoils ... how holiness expresses itself when meeting sin" (Cole 2017: 490). Notice how Paul sees no problem in God's love saving us from his own wrath, meaning that in God, love and wrath are not in tension with each other:

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. (Rom. 5:8f ESV)

5. PS has no place for the life and resurrection of Jesus; all that matters is the cross. This may be an issue of perception. If a proponent of PS writes about the meaning of Christ's death on the cross, he may naturally say little about Christ's life and resurrection. A fuller treatment of the atonement is aware of the importance of his life (e.g. it establishes positive righteousness) and his resurrection (he was "raised for our justification", Rom. 4:25). I will have more to say on this in the section on recapitulation and union.

The fact is, salvation entails much more than atonement in a narrow sense (although atonement is essential for salvation), and Christ's death on the cross accomplishes more than atonement only. That does not mean it is illegitimate to limit a discussion to, say, the penal significance of Christ's atoning death.

6. PS is a new idea (relatively speaking); the church fathers held to a Christus Victor understanding of the atonement. I will deal with the second part of this claim when I discuss Christus Victor. As for the first part, this is true of PS as a systematic statement. But then, apart from Anselm, hardly anyone had attempted a systematic explanation of the atonement. To speak of the satisfaction of God's justice rather than the satisfaction of his honour looks like a step forward, to – arguably – a better explanation of the *mechanism* of atonement. And as mentioned above, there are pointers to a penal view earlier on; see these long quotes from Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376-444) for an example:

For if we examine as well as we may the real character of the mystery of His work, we shall see that He died, not merely for Himself, nor even especially for His own sake; but that it was on behalf of humanity that He suffered and carried out both the suffering in itself and the resurrection that followed. For in that He died according to the flesh, He offered up His own life as *an equivalent for the life of all*; and by rendering perfect satisfaction for all, He fulfilled in Himself to the uttermost the force of that ancient curse. And in that He has risen again from the dead to a life imperishable and unceasing, in Himself He raises the whole of nature. (Cyril of Alexandria 1885a: 210; *Commentary on John IX*; emphasis added)

They lead away, then, to death the Author of Life; and for our sakes was this done, for by the power and incomprehensible Providence of God, Christ's death resulted in an unexpected reversal of things. For His suffering was prepared as a snare for the power of death, and the death of the Lord was the source of the renewal of mankind in incorruption and newness of life. Bearing the Cross upon His shoulders, on which He was about to be crucified, He went forth; His doom was already fixed, and He had undergone, for our sakes, though innocent, the sentence of death. For, in His own Person, He bore the sentence righteously pronounced against sinners by the Law. For He became *a curse for us*, according to the Scripture: *For cursed is everyone*, it is said, *that hangeth on a tree*. And accursed are we all, for we are not able to fulfil the Law of God: *For in many things we all stumble*; and very prone to sin is the nature of man. And since, too, the Law of God says: *Cursed is he which continueth not in all things that*

are written in the book of this Law, to do them, the curse, then, belongeth unto us, and not to others. For those against whom the transgression of the Law may be charged, and who are very prone to err from its commandments, surely deserve chastisement. Therefore, He That knew no sin was accursed for our sakes, that He might deliver us from the old curse. For all-sufficient was the God Who is above all, so dying for all; and by the death of His own Body, purchasing the redemption of all mankind.

The Cross, then, that Christ bore, was not for His own deserts, but was the cross that awaited us, and was our due, through our condemnation by the Law. For as He was numbered among the dead, not for Himself, but for our sakes, that we might find in Him, the Author of everlasting life, subduing of Himself the power of death; so also, He took upon Himself the Cross that was our due, passing on Himself the condemnation of the Law, that the mouth of all lawlessness might henceforth be stopped, according to the saying of the Psalmist; the Sinless having suffered condemnation for the sin of all. (Cyril of Alexandria 1885b: 623f; *Commentary on John XII*; cursive font in original; Cyril expresses a broad understanding of the atonement, with multiple facets, but it includes the idea of Christ taking our place and the consequence of our sin)

7. In the NT, the cross is never explained in terms of punishment. In fact, Paul's densest statement of the atonement, in Romans 3:21-26, refers neither to punishment nor to wrath. Christ's death was not meant to deal with wrath or judgment and therefore is not penal: Paul does not speak of Christ bearing *our punishment* for us.

This is an important argument in a well-written and thoughtful book, already cited several times, by Mark Baker and Joel Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (2011). However, from the start, it leaves me with the impression that one of its main aims is to persuade people away from the penal substitution view, and not always in a straightforward manner.

Of course, the word *wrath* is used extensively in the preceding two chapters of Romans, and Baker and Green are aware of it. The authors focus on Romans 1, where the revelation of God's wrath is a present, not a future phenomenon (73, 77-83, a rather long section). But they say hardly anything about Romans 2 and the fact that wrath also has a future, eschatological side. This is acknowledged in the text, but nothing is made of it. They also ignore that chapter 1 finishes with "God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die" (Rom. 1:32), which sounds like punishment.

In Romans 2 and 3, the future side of wrath and judgment takes central stage. Clearly and explicitly, judgment is coming, and at this point of the argument in Romans, Romans 3:20, all humans remain without any hope to be acquitted in this future judgment. What is needed is a way to prevent the assured verdict of condemnation that awaits the unrighteous and the ungodly in the day of judgment. Romans 3:21-26 reveals this way.

Surely then, even if this passage does not use words like *punishment*, *wrath*, or *judgment*, it nevertheless presents how God saves us from them. After all, Paul just spent two chapters painting the background of wrath and judgment; there is no need to repeat this now.

Punishment is indeed a rare word in the NT and not used in connection with the cross. However, the cross is connected with the curse: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'" (Gal. 3:13 ESV). This "curse of the law" is the legal consequence of breaking the covenant – an idea close to that of punishment.

Arguably, the biblical practice of sacrifice points in the same direction. PS offers a straightforward explanation of what sacrifice stands for: the giving of a life, executing a death sentence. If this is not the meaning of sacrifice, it remains unclear how blood can expiate (remove) sin or propitiate God's righteous wrath at sin.

8. PS is based on modern concepts of legal justice and the law court, which is quite different from legal systems in the biblical world. This argument is important to Baker and Green (2011: 120f; it also appears in their critique of Charles Hodge in chapter 6, 166-91). In the Bible, we are not dealing with the Western concept of impersonal criminal justice.

This is true. But covenants and more relational justice systems also know punishment, including the option of a death sentence and exile when the covenant is broken. The language of “curse” fits right in.

The objection does not disprove PS, but establishes the need to formulate appropriately – as in this quote, which also appears in Baker and Green: *“The shed blood is a sign that God has proved his covenant faithfulness precisely by undergoing the sanctions, legal and relational, for covenant disobedience”* (Vanhoozer 2004: 398, quoted in Baker and Green 2011: 186f; emphasis original).

9. Could God have chosen to simply forgive sin, without the need for any substitutionary punishment? Does he really have to punish sin? In the human world, we know the practice of pardon, in which a criminal is released without serving his punishment. Could God have extended a general pardon to all who would repent and turn to him, thus sparing his son the ordeal of the cross? If not, it appears to limit God: he is not free but is under obligation to punish.

I find this a difficult question and it has been controversially debated almost from the beginning. It won’t do to point to the many occasions where God does indeed forgive sinners in the Bible. He may have been doing this in anticipation of dealing with the debt of punishment later, as Romans 3:25f seems to imply (“he had passed over former sins”, but only “to show his righteousness at the present time”, through Christ paying the penalty on the cross). The same self-revelation of God that claims he is “slow to anger” and forgives iniquity also includes that he “will not leave unpunished” (so literally Ex. 34:6f). There is an obvious tension here. Is the cross the only way it could have been relieved? Opinions differ.

I do see some difficulties with the idea that God could ‘just as well’ forgive without propitiation or satisfaction.

- Is the widespread human intuition that criminals should pay for what they have done wrong? Hebrews does not consider retribution unjust: “every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution” (Heb. 2:2).
- To forgive and to pardon are not the same thing. Forgiveness is personal and private; it is entirely my decision if I want to forgive a debt, of whatever kind, that someone owes me. Pardon is public and formal; it is an act performed by rulers. Therefore:
- It is not only a question of what God requires (or desires) for his own sake; the issues are public, not private, and at stake is also what the universe as God’s creation needs. Even if God would not need retribution, what about others? What about the victims of transgression or injustice? Is it fair to let the perpetrators off the hook?
- To put this differently, God “must be just in justifying” (Davidson 2017: 52). The shocking paradox of Romans is that God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). How can this be just? “What the doctrine of the atonement attempts haltingly to articulate is the equal ultimacy of God’s love and God’s light (justice, holiness). On the cross neither mercy nor justice loses out” (Vanhoozer 2004: 403). It is not certain that God could have done this without the cross.
- A free pardon might make sin look cheap. And it might make God’s love less obvious. The way of the cross means it cost him dearly. Since God chose it, I think we can assume it was the best way possible.
- Maybe we need PS, so we can accept his shocking generosity. How would we know that the offered pardon is genuine? When God pre-emptively paid the penalty for our sin, he sent a strong sign that he is serious.

- Maybe we (or at least some of us) need it for a different reason as well. If God simply forgave us without further ado, would we be able to believe that guilt had been removed? Would we be able to overcome our sense of shame in his presence?
- Any sensible pardon assumes repentance; it is not a general pardon without any strings attached. Such a free-for-all is likely to leave everything unchanged – or make things worse. Maybe even Satan would avail himself of that kind of a pardon?

However, if repentance and life change are a condition, who will succeed? Israel's repentance in the OT never lasted long; why would we fare any better? Simple forgiveness alone would not have solved this. Admittedly, PS is not a full solution either. An important piece is still missing.

10. It does not make sense to both punish and forgive. If sin can be forgiven, there is no need to punish; if sin is punished, there is no need for forgiveness. Or is there? Some things to consider:

- It may be that substitutionary punishment is the very means or mechanism of forgiveness: God forgives through (by means of) PS. Perhaps Colossians 2:13f points in this direction: God has "forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt ... nailing it to the cross". It certainly sounds like a similar apparent contradiction.
- In our modern system of justice, punishment and forgiveness are unrelated. Victims of a crime may forgive the perpetrator; the judge will still condemn and punish that person. Even though things were different in biblical times, this fact proves the claim above is not a universal truth.
- Punishment does not take care of all the consequences of a crime. The criminal who is released after having served his term is not in every sense of the word restored – far from it! Forgiveness may be understood as personal and relational; if so, it goes beyond the status of 'punishment completed', dues paid.
- However, Craig (2020: 242-64, chapter 12) makes a strong case that divine forgiveness should be understood as a formal pardon, not as a parallel to personal, individual forgiveness, which is a private affair. God offers us a full pardon. But God is perfectly just. Can a pardon be just?

Since God is both the judge and the ruler with the power of pardon, he faces the dilemma of the righteous judge: how to be both just and merciful. PS is the solution. What forgiveness means, then, is that God does not let go of exacting punishment, but lets go of exacting punishment *from us*. Forgiveness and punishment are therefore not contradictory in this case.

11. How can one man's death pay for the sins and debts of everyone? One possible answer is: because he is also divine and therefore infinite. Any man, anyone else would not have sufficed; only the God-man, being infinite, would do.

Imagine scales. On one side, all humans are piled up, everyone who ever lived and everyone who will yet live. On the other side is Christ. Will this suffice? The answer is yes. Because he is also God; being infinite, he outweighs the totality of finite humanity.

12. It is not possible to transfer sin or guilt. Financial debt can be paid by someone else, but this is not possible for judicial punishment. Another person cannot go to prison for me.

However, just because "doing time" or otherwise taking upon oneself guilt or legal punishment for someone else is not an option in our criminal justice system does not mean it is fundamentally impossible. And even in our system, someone else may pay a fine for me. A fine is meant as a punishment; yet, the punishment is not upon me. This is a form of PS.

What is transferred in such cases is not necessarily sin or guilt; it could also be the liability for punishment or, as Crisp (2020: 97) puts it, the "penal consequences" of sin.

In other words, God "inflicted upon Christ the suffering which we deserved as the punishment for our sins, as a result of which we no longer deserve punishment. Notice that this explication leaves open

the question whether Christ was punished for our sins” (Craig 2020: 168). The latter is widely denied by proponents of PS:

On such an understanding, God afflicted Christ with the suffering which, had it been inflicted upon us, would have been our just desert and, hence, punishment. In other words, Christ was not punished, but he endured the suffering which would have been our punishment had it been inflicted on us. (Ibid.: 169)

Fact is, the NT does speak of Christ dying or giving himself for our sin(s) (1 Cor. 15:3; John 1:29; Gal. 1:4; Heb. 5:1, 3; 9:28; 1 Pet. 2:24; 3:18). PS offers the most straightforward explanation for what this means.

13. PS is unjust. It cannot be right to punish someone who is innocent.

In most cases, this is of course true. But if the substitute genuinely, freely, volunteers? The condition is virtually impossible to guarantee in normal human affairs – a good reason not to allow such a praxis in our justice system. But why would it always be wrong? The question is rarely asked, let alone answered. As Craig (2020: 197f) points out,

The objection, then, is the familiar Socinian objection that it would be unjust of God to punish Christ, an innocent person, in our place. Detractors of penal substitution who press this objection almost never develop it in any depth ... There is nothing here to interact with apart from the single question: How is justice served by punishing a completely innocent person? We need to go deeper.

In the pages that follow, Craig (ibid.: 198ff) refutes the objection. Of course, for those proponents of PS who believe Christ was not punished (but only suffered in our stead; see the previous point), the objection makes no sense. But even those who believe Christ *was* punished for our sins are not refuted by the ‘injustice’ argument. If we accept that our sins were imputed to Christ, he would not be innocent: he would be legally liable for those sins. The objection would not hold. But this leads to another objection.

14. Imputation is a legal fiction. The objection follows from the previous point. My sin is imputed to Christ; he is now legally liable to punishment. God pretends and counts Christ’s suffering as my punishment (and, in Reformed theology, his righteousness as my righteousness). But everyone can see that this is, in reality, untrue.

Let’s assume for a moment that we are indeed dealing with legal fiction. Why would this be bad? Whenever the objection is raised, it comes with a negative, even derogatory connotation. But is this justified?

In judicial matters, legal fiction is a most useful tool. Companies, associations, and other human institutions can be counted as “legal persons”. No one believes IBM or the national branch of the Red Cross is a real person. The fiction enables legal ownership and contractual obligations; it is most useful. Adoption is a legal fiction as well (of parenthood). Come to think of it: What do you think your nationality is? It is a fiction, not a real thing; you can even change it. But its consequences are real. And that is the crucial point: the consequences and results of something based on a legal fiction are concrete and real, and not at all fictional.

[Craig’s defence of legal fiction](#) (2018b; 2020: chapter 10, 197ff) is well worth reading. Theologians who are up in arms against the use of legal fiction in explanations of the atonement show all the signs of not knowing what they are talking about. Merely claiming that the atonement (or PS) is a legal fiction does not disprove it.

Besides, our relation to Christ (and his relationship with humanity) is more than merely formal and legal. He truly became one of us; his substitution and representation of us are not fictional. In the final section on union and recapitulation, I will come back to this.

To summarize: It appears PS is a valid way to speak of the atonement, helpful to understand what it involves – but it is incomplete. Legal systems and concepts of legal justice stop being helpful at some point; PS is, after all, a model, not an exact parallel. PS needs to be embedded in other biblical images and concepts (first and foremost that of sacrifice), so I continue my quest: are there more facets that need to be considered?

3: Back to the Church Fathers

Does Christus Victor trump penal substitution? In two previous issues, I began to present images, models, and explanations of the atonement. I have two more models to discuss (first and foremost Christus Victor). I will finish with an ancient but powerful alternative take on the whole question.

Christus Victor

Through his death on the cross, Jesus defeated the powers and gained a decisive victory over them, thus redeeming us from bondage and captivity. The cross is the victory over evil. This, in short, is the Christus Victor view.

You may wonder why this view appears here and not much earlier in this presentation. Isn't this the view that "dominated the thinking of the church for the first thousand years of its history" (Aulén 1931: 6; Boyd 2006: 24)? Well, no. The phrase was probably coined by Gustav Aulén; it certainly did not gain prominence until he published a book on the atonement with this title in 1931.

Aulén argued that there are three main types of explanations for the atonement, one of which is the view of the church fathers, according to Aulén, which he also called the classic view. It was dominant in the church until Anselm formulated his satisfaction view. Aulén considers Anselm and the Reformers as representatives of a so-called Latin view because of its prevalence in the Western church (Roman Catholic and Protestant). The third view sees the atonement as moral influence or example.

How influential Aulén's study has been shows in the fact that almost every book on the atonement refers to it. However, there are serious problems:

1. Category confusion. It causes confusion by throwing items together, into the same box ("the powers"), that belong to fundamentally different categories. Christ did indeed deliver us from the power of sin, from death, from the spiritual powers of evil, from human powers perhaps as well, and even from the Torah (Rom. 7). But these are quite different things.

In addition, the Christus Victor label combines under the same heading views of the atonement that differ greatly from each other. For this reason, I treated the ransom model separately; it is not at all the same as modern Christus Victor views (so also Crisp 2020: 6). What do we mean when we say things like: the cross is the victory over evil? How? Which forms or aspects of evil? The answers vary.

Some views that parade as Christus Victor are not explanations of the atonement at all (Crisp 2020: 51-6 comes to the same conclusion). *The Nonviolent Atonement* of Denny Weaver (2011), for instance, despite its title, reads more like a strategy by which God aims to transform human society, namely through the nonviolent path that Jesus took. That is a deliverance of sorts, but it does not qualify as atonement.

One would expect a model of the atonement to say something about solving the problem of sin and guilt and about forgiveness of sins, but this does not always happen in Christus Victor.

Christus Victor views (plural), then, are "exceptionally diverse, ranging from revitalisations of traditional positions to demythologised accounts" (Johnson 2017: 16). I am not sure it is a useful category, at least not without specifying what is meant by each representative.

2. Misrepresenting the church fathers. Aulén misconstrues what the church fathers taught. First, they rarely reflect consciously on the meaning and workings of the atonement. They did not develop a 'theory' of the atonement. Aulén systematizes what they did not systematize. (He admits this, but only in the final section of his book, page 158.) Second, the church fathers have a broad view of the

atonement; their statements include various themes, images, and ideas. There certainly is a strong theme (not theory) of victory over Satan, but it is not the only theme. They cannot be made to fit any single model or theory of the atonement (cf. Crisp 2020: 45):

The remarks of the Fathers on the atonement tend to reflect the multiplicity and diversity of the NT motifs concerning the atonement that the Fathers had inherited from the biblical authors. Hence, it would be inappropriate to ascribe to the Church Fathers any unified or developed theory of the atonement. All the NT motifs concerning atonement – sacrifice, substitutionary punishment, ransom, satisfaction, and so on – may be found in their pages. (Craig 2020: 107)

The notion that the Fathers were singularly committed to a Christus Victor theory of the atonement is a popular misimpression generated by the secondary literature. (Ibid.: 123)

3. Exclusive models. Aulén did the church a disservice by leaving us with the impression that the three models are exclusive and incompatible: either/or alternatives. But does anyone deny that Christ conquered? More to the point, does anyone who holds penal substitution deny this (see the quotation from Calvin)?

In short, since neither as God alone could he feel death, nor as man alone overcome it, he coupled human nature with divine that to atone for sin he might submit the weakness of the one to death; and that, wrestling with death by the power of the other nature, he might win victory for us ... clothed with our flesh he vanquished death and sin together that the victory and triumph might be ours. (Calvin 1960: 466; *Institutes* II.xii.3)

Compare Aulén's work with Rowan Williams (2017). The latter explains the meaning of the cross with three images, each of which corresponds with one of Aulén's types. The cross is a sign (example), it is a sacrifice (satisfaction), and it is victory. The difference is that for Williams, all three are true at the same time.

4. No explanation offered. The key question is: how did Christ gain his victory? It is clear how he conquered death: by resurrection. But the powers? The ransom theory has an answer. So does penal substitution: because sin and guilt have been dealt with, the devil has no grounds left to accuse us. God disarmed the powers by forgiving us our trespasses by cancelling the record of debt by nailing it to the cross (Col. 2:13-15; see also Rev. 12:10f). There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Right or wrong, it is at least an answer to the question: how?

Kolb (2017: 620) calls Christ's victory "the second half of his atoning work". It naturally flows from dealing with sin and condemnation; in fact, victory is the *result* of atonement in the narrow sense of the word, not part of the atonement itself.

How did Christ defeat the powers? What is the answer of Christus Victor? Apart from the ransom theory, I am not sure there is one. Gregory Boyd, who represents Christus Victor in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, admits as much (2006: 37, footnote 23).

In his defence of Christus Victor, Boyd gets it precisely upside down: because God defeated Satan and set us free from his power (how he did this remains unexplained) we can receive forgiveness of sin, so Boyd (2006: 32-4). "Salvation is most fundamentally ... about being 'set free from the present evil age' (Gal 1:4)" (ibid.: 32).

But notice the order in Galatians 1:4: Jesus "gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age". We are set free by dealing with sin, not defeating Satan. It is the same in Revelation 12:11. Satan is conquered "by the blood of the Lamb"; the latter represents "redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses" (Eph. 1:7). Forgiveness (through atonement) leads to victory, not victory to forgiveness.

As William Lane Craig (2020: 124) puts it: “Taken alone, Christus Victor not only ignores important NT atonement motifs, but it also fails of explanatory sufficiency, for it offers nothing to explain how God’s vanquishing Satan achieves forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God.”

I cannot help but think that Aulén’s work – and with it, Christus Victor – became so influential because he reduced the complexities of atonement theories to three options. The oversimplification proved irresistible. However, Aulén’s Christus Victor model is not what the church fathers taught; most of them had a broad but relatively unreflected and unsystematized understanding. The claim that this view dominated for a thousand years is not true. Christus Victor is more an appealing catchword than a well-defined model of the atonement.



Hugo Grotius and Moral Government

Because of its influence in some circles, I do not want to leave out the moral government model (MG), but I have to confess its logic and coherence somewhat escape me – which may indicate that I misunderstand it.

My section title includes Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), a legal and theological scholar from the Dutch Golden Age, only because MG often claims him as their founder. But Grotius has usually been misread and misunderstood. William Lane Craig (2020: 158-63) sets the record straight. Grotius defended a variant of penal substitution, in which God had some freedom to manoeuvre in judgment. Timing, the exact nature of the punishment, and even the person to be punished were flexible. God could even, in principle, have chosen to forgive sin without punishment (ibid.: 158; but see Van den Brink 2017: 523-6 for the opposite position on Grotius: in his *public* role, God could *not* do this). But as ruler and judge of the universe, as its governor (therefore governmental view or MG), so Grotius, God saw good reason not to do so. Instead, he chose to resolve the human predicament by having his Son, who willingly agreed to do so, bear punishment in our stead. And, therefore, punishment it was, not a mere demonstration of sin’s horrid nature and consequences.

This is precisely where MG differs from Grotius. In MG, Christ’s death on the cross is not our punishment but is a demonstration of the kind of punishment sin deserves and that would have been ours, had God punished us. It is a demonstration to warn of sin’s consequences, “for the sake of the moral governance of the world” (Craig 2020: 158):

In this view, in contrast to Calvin, Christ does not specifically bear the penalty for humanity’s sins; nor does he pay for individual sins. Instead, his suffering demonstrates God’s displeasure with sin and what sin deserves at the hands of a just Governor of the universe, enabling God to extend forgiveness while maintaining divine order. ([‘Satisfaction Theory of Atonement’](#), 2020)

But if so, is this not a variation on the moral influence model? Instead of through a demonstration of love God seeks to persuade us to repent through a demonstration of the horrible nature and deserts of sin. Besides, how does MG enable us to live the holy lifestyle now expected of us? Are we to become good through sheer fear of the “or else!” that is threatened in the demonstration?

Again, the problem may be that I am not getting MG, but I find this model puzzling and unnecessary.

Union with Christ and Recapitulation

In search for an end to my long discourse, I turn back to where I began, that is, to the church fathers. They may not have bequeathed to us fully formulated models of the atonement, but they did say crucial things that are too often overlooked. Especially in what they say about union with Christ, we find the missing key to pull different atonement threads together.



As I found out, others have made similar moves, either toward the church fathers or at least toward the idea of union, not merely as a fruit or outcome of salvation, but as foundational to its mechanism, essential to understanding *how* salvation and the atonement were accomplished:

The only meaningful sense in which the crucifixion of Christ in history can also be in truth the crucifixion of the evil flesh of his people is if our union with Christ lies at the heart of the atonement as God's action ... Theologians from across the vast scope of the Christian tradition have continued to insist in recent years that union with Christ is not a topic limited to salvation or the application of redemption, but is key to understanding its accomplishment as well. As the twentieth-century theologian John Murray once put it, "Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation not only in its application but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ" (161 [sic]). (Garcia 2017: 782f, quoting Murray 2015: 171, not 161, a book first published in 1955; for an additional example, see Crisp 2020: chapter 10)

In the work quoted by Garcia, Murray goes on to say:

It is also because the people of God were in Christ when he gave his life a ransom and redeemed by his blood that salvation has been secured for them; they are represented as united to Christ in his death, resurrection, and exaltation to heaven ...

In other words, we may never think of redemption in abstraction from the mysterious arrangements of God's love and wisdom and grace by which Christ was united to his people and his people were united to him when he died upon the accursed tree and rose again from the dead. (Murray 2015: 172f)

So others travelled a similar path, but the church fathers went there first. The relevant ideas find their clearest expression in Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130-c. 202) and Athanasius (c. 297-373). Although the title of Athanasius's best-known work centres on the incarnation, it is just as much about the atonement.

The central thought and the connection between incarnation and atonement is this: Christ became what we are, so that we could become what he is. "For He became Man that we might be made God"

(Athanasius 1903: 142; *Incarnation* LIV). The Son became human so that he could die – on our behalf. The incarnation enabled him to become our legal representative and substitute – if we will have him as such:

In virtue of Christ's incarnation (and, I should say, his baptism, whereby Jesus identified himself with fallen humanity), Christ is appointed by God to serve as our proxy before Him. The Logos, the second person of the Trinity, has voluntarily consented to be appointed, by means of his incarnation and baptism, to serve as our proxy before God so that by his death he might satisfy the demands of divine justice on our behalf.

Herein we see the organic connection between Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection. (Craig 2020: 228f)

Because he was divine, because he was life itself, his death could not last. He was the only human who could expect to enter death and come out alive, carrying us, as members of his body, with him. Having united himself with the human race, and having united the human race with himself, his resurrection made our resurrection possible.

Athanasius puts the emphasis on a different consequence of sin than guilt: the corruption of our nature and our resulting bondage to sin. He conceived of human nature as something with a real existence; it could be taken up by Christ into himself to heal and renew it. This won't quite work for us, because we do not understand human nature as something with its own, independent existence, and therefore it cannot be healed as such.

Still, with modifications, Athanasius greatly illumines what Christ's death and resurrection accomplished:

And there happened marvellously two things at once: the death of all was fulfilled in the Lord's body, and both death and corruption through the presence of the Word were utterly abolished. (Athanasius 1903: 80; *Incarnation* XX)

Through Christ's death and resurrection, God dealt with these aspects simultaneously. Sin was atoned for, we were removed from under the power and rule of sin, and our nature was healed from its corruption and renewed into his likeness.

(On a side note: obviously, then, the church fathers cannot be claimed to have almost universally held to some Christus Victor model of the atonement. Indeed, even Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c. 395), who is often presented as a prime example of a ransom model in which Satan was tricked, took the bait, and swallowed the hook, has a far more sophisticated understanding. The bait-and-hook illustration was used in a sermon; but as McGuckin (2017) argues, such ideas are not central to his view. He is close to Athanasius: the Word became human and so "recreates humanity and restores it to the original plan" (McGuckin 2017: 172). The incarnation leads to a salvation that transforms human nature and makes a different mode of life available.)

Recapitulation. For the Son of God to do all this, he had to become human. More than that, he had to retrace Adam's, humanity's, and Israel's steps, to become the new head of a new humanity, healed (from our corrupt nature), liberated (from the power of sin, among other things), and exonerated/forgiven/justified.

Irenaeus called this process *recapitulation*. He pointed out how Jesus recapitulated or repeated crucial experiences from the life of Adam. Jesus did the same in relation to Israel, such as his 40 days in the desert to be tempted by the devil. He succeeds where Adam and Israel failed.

But recapitulation is more than repetition. It is a wordplay, with a double meaning. First, it implies repetition. But second, based on its origin from the Latin word *caput* for *head*, it also means a summing up. In the context of theology, it includes the idea of summing up, bringing together, or uniting under a new head, that is, Christ.

We are dealing with a very biblical concept. Paul expresses it clearly in Ephesians 1:10; God's wills, "as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth". The Greek verb translated *to unite* is ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι, *to recapitulate* or *to sum up* – like the English term, also related to the (in this case Greek) word for *head*. For this reason, the NIV 1984 translated "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ".

Paul speaks of the liberating and renewing result of Christ's death at length in Romans 6-8. Not only has Christ died for us, we have also died with him, and therefore share in his resurrection as well. Perhaps important to point out: this is more than atonement. The latter is the subject of Romans 1:8-5:11, where Paul shows that, because "Christ died for us ... we have now been justified by his blood" (Rom. 5:8f). Paul then restates the human problem in Romans 5:12ff: it is a shared condition of humanity 'in Adam'. And in Romans 6-8 he proceeds to explain the broader solution, which takes us beyond atonement proper.

However, the various aspects of Christ's saving work are thoroughly integrated and connected. Looking at the bigger picture enables us to better understand the parts, including how Christ's death can be counted as ours. It helps us to make better sense of the atonement, as well as of any penal substitution model, and of salvation in a broad sense as well. We are not dealing with a legal fictitious phantasy. Jesus is not an arbitrary substitute, who then suffers our punishment. He is one with us as we are one with him, our legal and organic representative, and *therefore* his death counts as ours – cancelling the legal debt of humanity. There is therefore now no condemnation – for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1).

In Christ Jesus. This label marks the new path, the new possibility, other than 'in Adam' (always leading to death), that Jesus has opened for us through the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection.

This fits well with how the atonement is explicated in the letter to the Hebrews, which speaks of Christ as the "founder" (Heb. 2:10; also "initiator" or "originator") of our faith, the one who went ahead to prepare a way. Steve Motyer (2008: 144) even takes this rather than sacrificial suffering or penal substitution as "*the fundamental action in atonement ... he goes before us*" (emphasis in original).

In Hebrews, this leads to "the new and living way that he opened for us" (Heb. 10:20). And of course, like Athanasius, Hebrews places all of this within the context of the incarnation: "for a little while ... made lower than the angels, ... so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone ... Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect" (Heb. 2:9, 17).



In Christ Jesus. This label also helps to place penal substitution on a broader footing. There is no contradiction here. On the contrary, union with Christ provides further explanation of how penal substitution can work without having to assume some sort of fictitious exchange of sin for righteousness. Staunch defenders of penal substitution can be found to also support the idea of union with Christ as the underlying explanation for how Christ can be a substitute and representative. It is, for instance, the subject of the concluding chapter of the classic and influential defence of penal substitution by R. W. Dale (1875: 399ff) and appears in Calvin's *Institutes* (e.g. 1960: 465-7; II.xii.3). And at the beginning of this section I quoted John Murray to the same effect.

It is through Christ's union with us and through our union with Christ that his death counts as our death (he "taste[d] death for everyone", Heb. 2:9) and that we can be most truthfully justified (no fiction or accounting tricks here), at great expense to God and at no expense to ourselves – which is a good thing, seeing we cannot even make the tiniest contribution to paying off our debt.

Even Protestants, in their constructions of the doctrine of the cross, have left Christ on it and presumed that His saving work finishes with His death. The atonement is consequently explained in terms of a sacrifice on our behalf, a satisfaction of God's justice, a payment of our debt, a revelation of God's love, and that is all. It somehow seems to have been overlooked that the resurrection is an integral part of our Lord's work for us, so that salvation is essentially a deliverance from a living death in sin to a new life of righteousness in God (Beasley-Murray 2002: 39, quoted in Holmes 2008: 279)

Atonement Accomplished

This much is certain: the atonement is sufficient, comprehensive, and fully effective. And it is comprehensive and effective precisely because it is multifaceted.

It feels a bit narrow, therefore, to call penal substitution the "heart and soul" of the atonement, as Schreiner has it (2006: 67). There is more involved. And to be more fully biblical, covenantal language is appropriate. At stake are not crime and punishment, but curse and covenant. The breach of covenant means humanity is under the curse, cut off from the covenantal benefits that may be summed up as life itself, in all its fullness.

Still, the covenantal curse is a form of legal sanction and therefore of punishment. To return to the analogy of a building, then, penal substitution adjusted covenantally is a major and essential part. Without it, no cathedral called atonement would stand.

And Christus Victor? It is real and important, but I am not sure it is even part of the building. Rather, at least in relation to spiritual forces of evil, victory over them is a consequence, not a cause. Sin has not been overcome because the atonement defeated Satan and rendered him powerless. Satan has been rendered powerless because the death of Christ is "of sin the double cure" (as Toplady has it in "Rock of Ages"). Christ's union with us enabled him, through his death, to redeem us from the curse. Our union with Christ, through the resurrection, removed us from sin's rule and Satan's domain, and reconciled us to God.

The atonement is a cathedral but also a castle where we are safe and out of reach for the powers. But this victory is not itself the atonement.

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin **the double cure**,

Save me from its **guilt** and **power**. (Toplady, n.d.; emphasis added)

Book Recommendation

Craig, William Lane. 2020. [*Atonement and the Death of Christ: An Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Exploration*](#) (Waco: Baylor University Press)

Crisp, Oliver. 2020. [*Approaching the Atonement: The Reconciling Work of Christ*](#) (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press)

Williams, Rowan. 2017. [*God With Us: The Meaning Of The Cross And Resurrection - Then And Now*](#) (London: SPCK)



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