

# Theories of the Atonement

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The problem of understanding the Atonement arises from the Biblical teaching that due to man's ignorance of God and the resultant sins, man's relationship with God was severed, and man as a result faced just punishment. However, God's love compelled him to 'send his Son as an atoning sacrifice for man's sins,'<sup>1</sup> and as a result of this *atonement*, man was reconciled to God.

Throughout the Bible there appear several dominant streams of teaching regarding this event. The first, and clearly the most prominent, is that of sacrifice. Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites were to offer sacrifices, usually of animals, to atone for their sins. The Old Testament taught of four main types of sacrifice: the burnt offering, the peace offering, the sin offering and the guilt offering. In this system the sacrifice had to be offered with a genuinely penitent heart and had great emphasis on the importance of the value of the sacrifice to the guilty party.<sup>2</sup> If offered as prescribed, the offending party would be reconciled to God.<sup>3</sup>

The New Testament continues with the teaching of sacrifice but holds that Jesus, the Son of God, was the ultimate sacrifice and has in his death and resurrection reconciled man to God. The author of Hebrews tells us that 'believers have been made holy through the *sacrifice* of the body of Jesus Christ once for all,'<sup>4</sup> and the Apostle John wrote that 'Christ is the *atoning sacrifice* for man's sins.' These are merely examples of the teaching regarding the atonement and the sacrifice of Jesus throughout the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> Often viewed similarly to the sacrificial stream, Christ is said to have given his life 'as a ransom for many' by several authors throughout the New Testament,<sup>6</sup> though the clear differences between a sacrificial system and a ransom situation have often led to the separation of the two.

Another dominant theme is that of God's love in reconciling the world unto himself. The Bible is clear in its teaching that 'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life,'<sup>7</sup> and it is

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 4:10.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in 2 Samuel 24:22-24, Araunah offered King David whatever would please him to offer as a sacrifice to God: "Let my lord the king take whatever pleases him and offer it up. Here are oxen for the burnt offering, and here are threshing sledges and ox yokes for the wood." But David replied, "No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing."

<sup>3</sup> Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1983, pp.43-52.

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 10:10.

<sup>5</sup> See also Romans 4:25, 6:9-10, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Ephesians 5:1-2, Hebrews 7:27, 9:26, 1 Peter 3:18 & 1 John 4:10.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45, 1 Timothy 2:6 & Hebrews 9:15. (Though many scholars believe Matthew to have quoted extensively from Mark, including this verse.)

<sup>7</sup> John 3:16.

‘because of his great love for man that God made us alive with Christ.’<sup>8</sup> Such teachings leave no doubt that the reconciliation of Man with God originated in the will of God as a result of his love for his creation.<sup>9</sup>

The apostle Paul tells us that ‘God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ,’<sup>10</sup> and that ‘having disarmed the powers and authorities, Christ made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.’ Clearly, these verses have Christ effecting a form of victory over ‘sin and death,’<sup>11</sup> and form another theme of the New Testament concept of the Atonement.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, it is equally clear that the salvation of an individual man is ‘through faith, not by works,’<sup>13</sup> and it is through this faith that man becomes ‘one in Christ Jesus.’<sup>14</sup> The summation of these verses together with other explicit Scriptural statements<sup>15</sup> leaves us in no doubt that Jesus’ life, death and resurrection secured man’s reconciliation with God.

However, nowhere in the Bible is there an exact explanation of how this occurs. It is ‘in Christ that we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins,’ yet a universal agreement of the process of this redemption eludes us. The study of different and new theories of the Atonement (soteriology) seeks to adequately explain the process by which man is reconciled to God.

The stream of teaching in the Bible referring to Christ ‘paying a ransom’<sup>16</sup> in his death, along with the reference to Christ ‘preaching to the spirits in prison’ in 1 Peter 3:19,<sup>17</sup> and the many references to Christ effecting redemption throughout the New

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<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 2:4-5.

<sup>9</sup> See also Romans 8:32, Ephesians 3:17-19 & 1 John 4:10.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:57.

<sup>11</sup> Romans 8:2.

<sup>12</sup> See also Acts 2:24, Romans 6:9 & Hebrews 2:14-15.

<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9 cf. Romans 5:1.

<sup>14</sup> Galatians 3:26-28 cf. 1 Corinthians 6:17 & Romans 8:1.

<sup>15</sup> Such as Ephesians 1:7-8: “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.”

<sup>16</sup> Mark 10:45: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” And 1 Timothy 2:5-6: “...Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men...”

<sup>17</sup> 1 Peter 3:18-20a: “He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.” Also 1 Peter 4:6: “For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead...” Though it is clear that both of these verses are highly ambiguous in meaning, and therefore

Testament,<sup>18</sup> led many in the early church to formulate and accept what came to be known as the *Christus Victor* (“Christ the victor”) theory of Atonement.

The conclusion of such considerations, which was readily accepted and promulgated in the early church, was that due to sin, Satan justly had rights over sinful man. But God offered his son as a ransom to Satan in exchange for the sinful many, which Satan earnestly accepted. However, Satan soon found that he could not hold Jesus in Hell, as he ‘rose again on the third day,’ leaving Satan with no captives. It is in this way then, that Christ was victorious and triumphant over both Satan and death.

Rufinus of Aquileia analogised a variant of this theory in the form of a fishing trip:

For the object of that mystery of the Incarnation ... was that the divine virtue of the Son of God, as though it were a hook concealed beneath the form and fashion of human flesh... might lure on the Prince of this world to a conflict, to whom offering His flesh as a bait, His divinity underneath might catch him and hold him fast with its hook, through the shedding of His immaculate blood. For He alone Who knows no stain of sin hath destroyed the sins of all, of those, at least, who have marked the doorposts of their faith with His blood. As, therefore, if a fish seizes a baited hook, it not only does not take the bait off the hook, but is drawn out of the water to be itself food for others, so He Who had the power of death seized the body of Jesus in death, not being aware of the hook of Divinity inclosed within it, but having swallowed it he was caught forthwith, and the bars of hell being burst asunder, he was drawn forth as it were from the abyss to become food for others.<sup>19</sup>

The difference between the two theories is found in that in the first theory, Satan knew and craved the capture of the Son of God, but was surprised when he escaped his clutches after three days. Whereas the second view has Satan thinking he has snared just another human (which he has authority to do, due to man’s sin), but in fact oversteps his bounds when it is realised that clothed in this human flesh is the innocent (and therefore out-of-bounds) Son of God.

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any theory built on a particular interpretation of these verses should be treated with adequate caution.

<sup>18</sup> Ephesians 1:7, Romans 8:1-2 & Galatians 3:14.

<sup>19</sup> Rufinus of Aquileia, “A Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers II vol.iii*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), 2000, 16.

Gregory of Nyssa is one of many writers of the early church who commented similarly,<sup>20</sup> but Gregory also appreciated the implication of these theories: that God in some way deceived the devil (as the omniscient God would have foreseen the outcome of his offer of the ransom of Jesus)<sup>21</sup> and addresses this ‘objection’ with the rationale that the devil was treated as he had treated others and so it was just.<sup>22</sup>

Gregory’s dismissal of any objections to the imagery of God deceiving Satan was characteristic of his time, as the idea of God ‘outwitting’ Satan and thus triumphing over him seemed particularly appealing in that pre-enlightenment era.<sup>23</sup> However, the embarrassing possibility of God being guilty of deception eventually led to the reassessment of the theory and its subsequent general rejection by the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup>

The early 20th century, however, saw a variant of the Christus Victor approach reintroduced by Gustav Aulén in his book *Christus Victor*,<sup>25</sup> with the emphasis in his

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<sup>20</sup> Gregory of Nyssa said, “Deity was hidden under the veil of our nature, that so, as with ravenous fish, the hook of the Deity might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh, and thus, life being introduced into the house of death, and light shining in darkness, that which is diametrically opposed to light and life might vanish; for it is not in the nature of darkness to remain when light is present, or of death to exist when life is active.” (Gregory of Nyssa, “The Great Catechism” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers II vol.v*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), 2000, ch.24.) Augustine replaced the imagery of the fishhook with a mousetrap, but was otherwise the same. (Leon Morris, *The Cross of Jesus*, Eerdmans, Michigan, 1994, p.23.)

<sup>21</sup> Morris comments on this theory: “It did not require profound thinking to see that the omniscient God must have known [what would happen]. In offering his bargain it seems that he deceived Satan. But, bless you, that did not phase the early church fathers in the least. They gloried in it.” (Morris, *The Cross of Jesus*, op. cit., p.23.)

<sup>22</sup> “...by the reasonable rule of justice, he who practiced deception receives in return that very treatment, the seeds of which [he] had himself sown of his own free will.” (Gregory of Nyssa, op. cit., ch.26.)

<sup>23</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), Blackwell, Oxford, 1997, pp.395-7. In defense of the Early Church Fathers, the discussion and exposition of doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Christ received much fuller attention in these early times than soteriological study, due to the constant heretical manipulation of these issues.

<sup>24</sup> **The enlightenment period saw new criticisms offered of the Christus Victor view, including (as an offshoot of enlightenment questioning of bodily resurrection) whether or not a victory over death could even be claimed, and whether the idea of a personal devil in the form of Satan was not a touch superstitious and outdated.** (McGrath, op. cit., p.397.)

<sup>25</sup> In recounting the history of the Christus Victor theory, Aulén claims Martin Luther as the most powerful expounder of the classic view up until his time (though Luther’s teaching in this area has been ‘largely ignored or hidden’). (Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An*

‘classic’ theory<sup>26</sup> upon the important truths behind the ‘grotesque’ metaphors. Aulén states that “[its] central theme is the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ—Christus Victor—fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the ‘tyrants’ under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself.”<sup>27</sup>

It is important to Aulén to note that the Christus Victor approach is ‘sharply distinct’ from other theories of the Atonement as it is thoroughly the work of God: “from first to last a work of God Himself, a *continuous* Divine work”<sup>28</sup> Whereas other theories have the process of reconciliation originating in God’s will, but at some point become an offering to God made by Christ as a man and so could be viewed as a *discontinuous* Divine work.<sup>29</sup>

The simplicity of the theory and appreciation of man’s bondage to sin gives the classic view much appeal, however it is clear that weaknesses lie in its lack of engagement with the personal problem of sin: that sin is more than enslavement to demonic powers, it is personal and past disobedience to God.<sup>30</sup> It also seems that in both the earlier and modern Christus Victor approach it is Satan or the ‘powers of evil’ that must be satisfied rather than God, whose command was originally ignored in the Garden of Eden,<sup>31</sup> and who is continually ignored by all mankind.<sup>32</sup> Surely it is God who must be satisfied, even if he has to satisfy himself.

A further criticism could be found in the theory’s lack of engagement with the plentiful teachings of sacrifice *as* sacrifice. It seems that the plethora of sacrificial references and imagery are treated simply as ransom-like acts by both Christus

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*Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (trans. by A. G. Hebert), S.P.C.K., London, 1978, pp.121 & 123-4.) The image of Christ triumphant is not uncommon in the modern world’s churches, especially around the time of Easter, and in traditional (and indeed Lutheran) Hymns. The point of Aulén’s argument here is to show that the Christus Victor theory has had quite a presence in the history of the Church as well as in the modern Church (though non-dominating), and so deserves a thorough investigation as well as a clear and scholarly exposition—which his book sets out to accomplish. See Aulén, op. cit., chapters 6 & 7 for his views on Luther.

<sup>26</sup> The *classic* theory is named as such by Aulén, so as to distinguish it from other ‘objective’ theories.

<sup>27</sup> Aulén, op. cit., p.4.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>30</sup> Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth, A Handbook of Christian Belief*, Inter-Varsity Press, Illinois, 1982, p.167.

<sup>31</sup> Genesis 3.

<sup>32</sup> All men ignore God in that even the ‘saved’ still sin, and in their sin ignore God. See Romans 3:10-18.

Victor approaches. That said, the embracing of those teachings of victory and redemption indicate the Scriptural plausibility of the modern view, as it does not negate other Biblical teaching—obviously the more ancient view can easily be dismissed due to its unapologetic inclusion of a deceitful God.<sup>33</sup>

The Early Church Fathers did not all subscribe to the Christus Victor approach, and if an individual did, he may have also held other views as well – most soteriological theories are not mutually exclusive. Another prevalent theory stated that Christ in some way satisfied a need allowing reconciliation between man and God. Athanasius, the fourth century bishop of Alexandria, said:

For being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering His own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all satisfied the debt by His death.<sup>34</sup>

And Ambrose, the fourth century bishop of Milan, said:

...as man He bore my grief, as man He spake, and therefore said, “Not as I will, but as Thou wilt.” Mine was the grief, and mine the heaviness with which He bore it, for no man exults when at the point to die. With me and for me He suffers, for me He is sad, for me He is heavy. In my stead, therefore, and in me He grieved Who had no cause to grieve for Himself.<sup>35</sup>

The view only gained great acceptance centuries later with Anselm, the 11<sup>th</sup> Century Archbishop of Canterbury, who saw Jesus’ work as satisfying God’s wounded honour. It has been suggested that Anselm formulated his theory as a result of dissatisfaction with the previously mentioned view of the cross as a victory, with its incorporated ideas of Satan having rights (with God under some compulsion to respect them), and the embarrassing notion that God tricked Satan into relinquishing those rights.<sup>36</sup> His argument, contained in his book *Cur Deus Homo* (“Why did God

become man?”) is in the form of a dialogue between himself and a character named ‘Boso,’ and is expressed in the form of “abject reasoning.”<sup>37</sup>

Anselm details his idea that sin is a debt owing to God, because the sinner withholds from God the honour that is due to Him. Consequently, sin requires not just a return to obedience, but some additional *satisfaction* for the wrong committed.<sup>38</sup>

Anselm’s argument continues that God’s perfect righteousness and honour requires that either the honour taken away by sin be repaid, or the sinner punished;<sup>39</sup> however, he further points out that that there are no acts possible by man to make this satisfaction and therefore it is impossible for man to act successfully himself.<sup>40</sup> Further, such a satisfaction for sin cannot be made by anyone who is less than God, and ought not be made by anyone who is not man (as man caused the sin and so should make the satisfaction), it must, therefore, be made by one who is both divine and human: a God-man.<sup>41</sup> And that is the answer to the question in the title of the book, *why did God become man?* So that as a God-man he could as a man rightly attempt to make satisfaction, and as God actually make the satisfaction. Anselm concluded that when Jesus led the perfect and innocent life he had no need to die, so his death was therefore an act of infinite merit that became available to sinful man as a means of satisfying his sin.<sup>42</sup>

Several aspects of Anselm’s argument have attracted criticism in recent time, not least his inclusion of the artificial ideas of God facing a dilemma and of the quantifying of merit, especially its use as the basis for his argument. Further, the stipulation that punishment is an alternative to satisfaction rather than the means of satisfaction together with the theme that God had to be reconciled, rather than God reconciling the world unto himself are other weaknesses of this theory, together with the lack of any doctrine of faith-union with Christ.<sup>43</sup>

Many scholars feel that Anselm had been deeply influenced by the feudal assumptions of his time, even to the point of regarding God as the ‘lord of the manor,’ it is also a strong possibility that Anselm’s views on the need for a ‘satisfaction’ may derive from the churches then-common practice of penance.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The Bible is clear on the moral purity of God: see Psalm 119:142, 145:17, Isaiah 56:1, Jeremiah 9:24, Revelation 16:5.

<sup>34</sup> Athanasius, “On the Incarnation of the Word” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers II vol.iv*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), 2000, ix.2.

<sup>35</sup> Ambrose, “Exposition of the Christian Faith” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers II vol.x*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), 2000, ii.53.

<sup>36</sup> McGrath, op. cit., p.400.

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<sup>37</sup> Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* (trans. by Edward S. Prout), Religious Tract Society, London, 1885, preface.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, i.11.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, i.13.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, i.20-21.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, ii.6.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, ii.19.

<sup>43</sup> Milne, op. cit., p.164.

<sup>44</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1958, p.386. In practicing penance, the sinner is required to confess their sins to a priest who pronounces

It has also been pointed out that according to Anselm's theory there is no necessary connection between the death of Christ and the salvation of sinners. Anselm says that Christ had no need to die, so in his death he merited a great reward. But he had no need for this reward so he turned the reward over to sinners, 'to those he had died for.'<sup>45</sup> Although the death of Christ is still central to the issue, the view of Christ as *deciding* to allow his reward to be given to sinful man is certainly worthy of criticism.<sup>46</sup>

However, there are many positive aspects of Anselm's view including his emphasis of the moral infallibility of God and the profound sense of majesty and Lordship of God. Above all, Anselm's view on the absolute seriousness of sin merits attention.<sup>47</sup> When Boso suggests that sin is blotted out 'with one single pang of sorrow for it', Anselm immediately replies: "Have you not yet considered what a terrible weight sin is?"<sup>48</sup>

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their sins forgiven, and then requires the sinner to do some godly act as satisfaction for that sin. (McGrath, op. cit., p.401.)

<sup>45</sup> Anselm, op. cit., ii.19: "To whom could he assign the fruit and recompense of his death more suitably than to those for whose salvation... He made Himself man, and to whom... by His death He gave an example of dying on behalf of righteousness?"

<sup>46</sup> Berkhof, op. cit., p.386.

<sup>47</sup> James Denney exclaims: "It is Anselm's profound grasp of [the truth of the seriousness of sin] which, in spite of all its inadequacy in form, and of all the criticism to which its inadequacy has exposed it, makes the *Cur Deus Homo* the truest and greatest book on the Atonement that has ever been written." James Denney, *The Death of Christ* (Ed. by R. V. G. Tasker), Tyndale Press, London, 1954, p.188. (See footnote 48 for an extract from *Cur Deus Homo* dealing with the seriousness of sin.)

<sup>48</sup> Anselm, op. cit., i.21. To then demonstrate the seriousness of sin, Anselm puts Boso in the following situation:

*Anselm.* If you were to see yourself in the presence of God, and someone should say to you, 'look thither,' and God, on the other hand, were to say, 'I wish you on no account to look,' ask now in your own heart, what is there in all things that exist for the sake of which you ought to take that look contrary to the will of God?

...

*Boso.* I see clearly that I cannot.

*Anselm.* Not to detain you too long: what if it were necessary either that the whole world, and all that is not God, perish and be reduced to nothing, or that you should do so slight an act against the will of God?

*Boso.* When I think of the act itself I see that it is a very trifling one. But when I look at what is in opposition to the will of God, I perceive that it is exceedingly grave, and not to be compared with any loss that might be sustained. But we are wont sometimes to do a thing against the will of someone, yet without blame, that his property may be preserved; and we do against his will what afterwards he is pleased with.

In the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas developed a more thorough theological basis for the 'satisfaction' theory. After stating that "A proper satisfaction comes about only when someone offers to the person offended something which gives him a delight greater than his hatred of the offence", he goes on to argue based on three considerations that Christ was able to "give more to God than was required to compensate for the offence of the whole human race". The first of these considerations is Christ's love that led to his suffering ("the exceeding charity from which He suffered"), the second is the infinite worth of his divine nature along with his human nature ("the dignity of His life which He laid down in atonement, for it was the life of one who was God and man"), and thirdly due to his great passion and the sorrow which he took upon himself ("on account of the extent of the Passion, and the greatness of the grief endured").<sup>49</sup>

Aquinas' view then, preserves Anselm's teaching of the centrality of the cross in the salvation of sinners and the emphasis on the need for the divinity of Jesus in the calculation of merit, but also indicates the importance of the humanity of Jesus in the taking on of his sufferings and in the expression of his love. In comparison, Anselm seemed to treat Christ's humanity simply as the means by which he could justly take the punishment for man's sins.<sup>50</sup>

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*Anselm.* This is done for a man who sometimes does not understand what is done for his advantage, or cannot restore what he has lost. But God is in need of no one, and could restore all things, were they to perish, just as He made them.

*Boso.* I must confess that in order to preserve the whole creation, I ought not to do anything against the will of God.

...

*Anselm.* You can do nothing better. But suppose it happened that you did take that look against the will of God, what could pay for that sin?

*Boso.* I have nothing more than I have said above.

*Anselm.* Thus seriously do we sin whenever we knowingly do anything, however slight, against the will of God. For we are always in His sight, and He is always bidding us not to sin.

(*ibid.*, i.21.)

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Master Christian Library (8<sup>th</sup> Ed. CD-ROM), 2000, 3a, q.48, a.2. Aquinas also puts forward the possible objection that in murdering Christ (an innocent and divine being), the perpetrators were committing such a 'foul sin,' that it could not find atonement through any means. In response, Aquinas claims that "**Christ's love was greater than His slayers' malice: and therefore the value of His Passion in atoning surpassed the murderous guilt of those who crucified Him: so much so that Christ's suffering was sufficient and superabundant atonement for His murderer's crime.**" (*ibid.*, q.48, a.2, ro.2.)

<sup>50</sup> McGrath, op. cit., p.402.

The sixteenth century, with its appreciation of the importance of human law, saw the reformers drawing together of Anselm's alternatives of punishment or satisfaction to form the *Penal Satisfaction* theory, where satisfaction must be made through punishment for God's *broken law* rather than his *wounded honour*. The Penal Satisfaction theory, teaches that sin is a contravention of the moral law that is ultimately correlative with the eternal character of God,<sup>51</sup> and formed three main models.

The *representation* model had Christ as the covenant representative of man before God, allowing believers to enter into this covenant through faith, and thus receive forgiveness and all other rewards bestowed upon Christ. The *participation* model uses Paul's words, "in Christ,"<sup>52</sup> to say that through faith, believers participate in the risen Christ as they are "in him", as well as sharing in all the rewards he won for his obedience on the cross. The third model, that of *substitution* or *vicarious sacrifice*, has Christ simply receiving the punishment that sinners deserved, also taking their guilt upon himself, thus allowing man to take his righteousness upon themselves and so be restored in their relationship with God.<sup>53</sup>

Following these three models the representation and the participation models came together in a new form of *representation* model to say that Christ died as a representative sacrifice to God, and through faith, man becomes 'one with Christ' and so dies with him (this model will be discussed henceforth as the *representative* model). At this point it is necessary to consider the implications of each of these models. Advocates of the *representative* model use Paul's 'one in Christ' teaching to argue that 'the Apostle didn't understand Jesus to have died for the ungodly, but that the ungodly in Christ died for themselves.'<sup>54</sup> Advocates of the *vicarious* model emphasise the need to acknowledge the Biblical teaching that God sent Jesus for man:<sup>55</sup> the meaning of 'representative' as opposed to 'substitute' or 'vicar' in this case has man choosing Christ as man's representative rather than God sending Christ as man's substitute.<sup>56</sup>

Following the introduction of these theories, Luther, thinking he was in danger of being over-objective, insisted that "faith alone justifies, but it is never faith alone—it

is always followed by works of love."<sup>57</sup> Calvin, in explaining why God became man,<sup>58</sup> states his soteriological claim:

...man, who had lost himself by his disobedience, should by way of remedy, oppose to it obedience, satisfy the justice of God, and pay the penalty of sin. Therefore our Lord came forth very man, adopted the person of Adam, and assumed his name, that he might, in his stead obey the Father; that he might present our flesh as the price of satisfaction to the just judgement of God, and in the same flesh pay the penalty which we had incurred. Finally, since as God only he could not suffer, and as man only could not overcome death, he united the human nature with the divine, that he might subject the weakness of the one to death as an expiation of sin, and by the power of the other, maintaining a struggle with death, might gain us the victory.<sup>59</sup>

The Enlightenment period saw this penal view criticised for its notions of the transferability of sin, guilt and punishment, as well as its basing on the teaching of inherited guilt from original sin.<sup>60</sup> Further, it was thought that one human being bearing the penalty for others was morally questionable, and therefore unacceptable for Christian doctrine.<sup>61</sup>

There is undoubtedly room to question the justice of an innocent accepting the punishment of the guilty, especially as this is the objection raised against the substitutionary theories most often. When the objection is raised, it is often compared to a legal situation in which an innocent person accepts the punishment for a person

<sup>57</sup> Milne's paraphrase of Luther (Milne, op. cit., p.165).

<sup>58</sup> Calvin lists four reasons why God had to become man:

- i. As it was necessary by divine decree that God should become man, as neither angel nor human would suffice.
- ii. As he had to convert those who were "heirs of hell" into "heirs of a heavenly kingdom", and how could this happen "unless the Son of God should also become the Son of man, and so receive what is ours as to transfer to us what is his, making that which is his by nature to become ours by grace?"
- iii. That "in our flesh he might yield a perfect obedience, satisfy the divine justice, and pay the penalty of sin.
- iv. That "he might wipe away our guilt, and appease the just anger of his father".

(John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. by Henry Beveridge), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids (MI), 1998, II.xii.1-3.)

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, II.xii.3. (See footnote 68 for meaning of *expiation*.)

<sup>60</sup> McGrath, op. cit., p.403; Morris, *The Cross Of Jesus*, op. cit., p.17.

<sup>61</sup> McGrath, op.cit., p.403.

<sup>51</sup> Milne, op. cit., p.165.

<sup>52</sup> For example, Romans 8:1.

<sup>53</sup> McGrath, op. cit., pp.402-3.

<sup>54</sup> Denney, op. cit., p.195.

<sup>55</sup> John 3:16, 1 John 4:10.

<sup>56</sup> Denney, op. cit., p.195-6; Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament*, Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1976, p.408ff.

guilty of some transgression. It is suggested that no just person could accept this circumstance in a law court of today, let alone in a just God. However, Louis Berkhof suggests a set of circumstances when such a transaction should be acceptable. 'First: the guilty party must not be able to bear the punishment to its full extent himself. Second: any third parties should not have their rights or privileges encroached upon, nor any suffering or hardships caused. Third: the person enduring the penalty should not already be indebted in some way and aiming to then take the one punishment for his own transgression as well as for the transgressions of others. Fourth: the guilty party must retain the knowledge of his guilt and of the fact that the substitute is suffering for him.'<sup>62</sup>

According to these points, it is hard, if not impossible to find a purely human situation in which these four ideals could be met; yet the idea of a transaction of man's sin to Christ does align with these four points. Berkhof notes this and concludes that "[there] was no injustice of any kind".<sup>63</sup>

However, it seems that the principal injustice would occur not to the judicial system or to the judge, nor to any third party; but to the innocent who would be punished. It is only when that innocent has genuine desire to take the punishment of the guilty that it could be just with regards to the innocent; and if there is still unjust remaining, surely it is the guilty who are unjust and not the judge. For if the situation were to arise that the innocent genuinely desired to vicariously atone for the guilty party, it would indicate that the innocent feared more pain would befall them should the guilty be punished than if they were to take the punishment upon themselves. Surely therefore the guilty who put the innocent in such a position are then further guilty for committing the innocent to a choice of either of two such pains. It is they who are unjust, and yet it is they who will be justified.

Further, it is the unity of God and Christ in the Godhead that disallows any possibility of God 'the judge' unjustly punishing the innocent Christ. It cannot be forgotten that God took the punishment justly due to man upon himself in sending Christ: "When Christ substitutes for sinful man in His death that is God Himself bearing the consequences of our sin, God saving man at cost to Himself, not at cost to someone else".<sup>64</sup>

A further objection that is frequently offered is that God (who 'is love'<sup>65</sup>) should be able to forgive as he pleases, requiring no necessary atonement in such an act. Paul Wernle wrote: "How miserably all those finely constructed theories of sacrifice and vicarious atonement crumble to pieces before this faith in the love of God our Father,

who so gladly pardons! The one parable of the Prodigal Son wipes them all off the slate."<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, such a view ignores the Biblical treatment of the seriousness of sin, as well as the purely just nature of God.

The Old Testament and the New come together in their denunciation of sin, especially from God's viewpoint.<sup>67</sup> Further, Leon Morris states that the Greek word rendered 'sacrificial atonement' or 'expiation'<sup>68</sup> in many translations of the Bible, would be more correctly rendered 'propitiation' in several verses,<sup>69</sup> not least 1 John 4:10: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as the *propitiation* for our sins."<sup>70</sup>

Now 'propitiation' explicitly refers to the turning away of anger (usually by the offering of a gift),<sup>71</sup> and in the case of Jesus' act of propitiation, it is the diverting of God's wrath.<sup>72</sup> Since then, the function of Jesus' death was to turn God's anger

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<sup>66</sup> Wernle, *The beginnings of Christianity* (Eng. trans.), I, p.109, cited by D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement*, Faber & Faber, London, 1961, p.172.

<sup>67</sup> "The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates. On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot. For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face." (Psalm 11:2-6 cf. Psalm 7:11, Colossians 3:6.) Morris points out that 'though there is neither the same richness of vocabulary nor the same frequency of mention in the New Testament treatment of the wrath of God as in the Old, nevertheless, the relevant passages show that for the early Christians, the divine wrath was just as real as for the Old Covenant.' (Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1976, p.179.)

<sup>68</sup> Where *propitiation* means 'the turning away of anger', *expiation* means 'making amends for a wrong.' *Propitiation is a personal word, expiation an impersonal* ("one expiates a sin or a crime"). (Morris, *The Atonement*, op. cit., p.151.)

<sup>69</sup> Romans 3:25, 1 John 2:2, 4:10, Hebrews 8:12 (quoting Jeremiah 31:34: 'I will be *propitious* with reference to their sins').

<sup>70</sup> Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, op. cit., pp.144-5. Vincent Taylor argues that the idea of propitiation is 'far removed from the teaching of the New Testament,' but 'expiatory ideas are encouraged.' (Vincent Taylor, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching*, Epworth Press, London, 1945, p.198.) Morris reacts to such claims with discussion recalling the inability of man to adequately express divine characteristics such as God's wrath, and proceeds to point out: "God's wrath is a righteous anger... Those who object to the conception of the wrath of God should realise that what is meant is not some irrational passion bursting forth uncontrollably, but a burning zeal for the right coupled with a perfect hatred for everything that is evil." (Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, op. cit., p.209.)

<sup>71</sup> Morris, *The Cross of Jesus*, op. cit., p.6.

<sup>72</sup> Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, op. cit., pp.144-5; Morris, *The Cross of Jesus*, op. cit., p.6.

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<sup>62</sup> Berkhof, op. cit., p.376.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, p.376.

<sup>64</sup> Morris, *Cross in NT*, op. cit., p.410.

<sup>65</sup> 1 John 4:8ff.

away; it cannot be argued that a Biblical view of Atonement could include the overlooking of sin.

Further, many suggest that the overlooking of sin by God may allow man to gain an unrealistic view of God's attitude towards sin. D. M. Baillie comments on the possibility of God forgiving without atonement: 'such an arrangement would provide the danger that this should be taken to mean that God is willing to pass lightly over man's sins because they do not matter much to him; that it is all a matter of easy routine, about which we need not be greatly concerned and need not greatly wonder.'<sup>73</sup>

In this view the transferral of sin is not implied, yet this possibility is hinted at within the scriptures when the passage reads that man's sins have been "laid upon" Christ, or of his "bearing" man's sin or iniquity.<sup>74</sup> But the Bible is equally clear that 'in him was no sin,'<sup>75</sup> and that he was 'a lamb without blemish or defect'<sup>76</sup> Therefore it seems it is to be understood that Christ bore man's sin in that he bore the *weight* of man's sin, meaning that he took man's punishment, 'the righteous for the unrighteous.'<sup>77</sup>

Overall, the penal substitution theory leaves an image of God intervening in a *right* and loving way. That is, his mercy is not unjustly merciful by simply ignoring sin, it instead gives sin the attention and focus it demands as well as the contempt it deserves. Further, the specific vicarious sacrifice model is certainly faithful to those streams of teaching concerning both the sacrificial nature of the Atonement, and the love of God as the divine originator of the reconciling work. Further, it is not hard to imagine the *ransom* teachings applied metaphorically to give further insight or understanding to the nature of the sacrifice. Finally, the necessary faith of a believer in order to share in Christ's work is emphasised well in all the sacrificial models, and it is through this faith that a believer can 'count himself dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus,'<sup>78</sup> which is surely a victory 'over sin and death.'<sup>79</sup>

The above-mentioned Christus Victor and sacrificial theories, are classed as *objective* theories of the Atonement, as they relate most specifically to events and acts outside of the individual believer. In contrast to the objective theories, are the subjective, in

which the act of reconciliation of man with God is found primarily in the effect on the individual believer.

The dominant subjective theory of the Atonement is clearly that which is known as the *Moral Influence* theory.<sup>80</sup> Arising from a dissatisfaction with the idea of God punishing an innocent in the stead of the guilty, and focusing on the 'power of God's love' and the individual's response to this love, the theory has achieved popularity, especially with the rise of liberalism.<sup>81</sup> Although varying its form throughout history, the core teaching remains that God was willing to forgive man his imperfections but man first had to become forgivable. So God sent Jesus, whose death was the supreme show of love, in the expectation that man should then respond to this love by repenting and genuinely seeking to serve God, at which point he could forgive them. An emphasis on the love of God compelling a reaction from man is found in the Scriptures (though not as a soteriological theory),<sup>82</sup> as well as in the writings of the Early Church Fathers<sup>83</sup> and throughout the history of the Church. Peter Abelard of the 12<sup>th</sup> century is usually attributed the beginnings of the theory, though his extensive soteriological writing is certainly not limited to the Moral Influence view.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, Abelard stressed the importance of the subjective nature of the Atonement: "the purpose and cause of the incarnation was that Christ might illuminate the world by his wisdom, and excite it to love of himself."<sup>85</sup>

The *Moral Influence* view has a great emphasis on God's love, both his love for man and his love as the originator for the act of the Atonement. However, there is a lack

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<sup>73</sup> Baillie, op. cit., p.172.

<sup>74</sup> See Isaiah 53:6,12, John 1:29, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Galatians 3:13, Hebrews 9:28, 1 Peter 2:24.

<sup>75</sup> 1 John 3:5 cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21.

<sup>76</sup> 1 Peter 1:19 cf. Hebrews 9:14.

<sup>77</sup> 1 Peter 3:18.

<sup>78</sup> Romans 6:11.

<sup>79</sup> Romans 8:2.

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<sup>80</sup> F. D. E. Schleiermacher, who insisted upon the religious influence, rather than the moral influence of Jesus, suggests a less common subjective theory. His argument claims that the purpose of Jesus' life was to evoke a realisation of the 'supreme consciousness of God' in humanity, i.e., Jesus' attitudes and teaching impacted humanity in such a way that the supremacy of God's character is both realised and idealised by man. (McGrath, op. cit., pp.409-10.)

<sup>81</sup> The Primate of the Anglican Church of Australia, Dr Peter Carnley, a modern advocate of a form of the Moral Influence theory, expressed his views on behalf of the Anglican Church of Australia in the April 17, 2001 edition of *The Australian Bulletin*. (His views received much contention from within the Church, most notably from representatives of the 'evangelical' Sydney diocese.)

<sup>82</sup> For example, 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:1.

<sup>83</sup> Clement of Alexandria points out: 'Jesus laid down his life for us in a great show of love, and he requires that we should do the same for each other.' (Clement of Alexandria, *Quis Dives Salvetur*, 37; in *Clement of Alexandria: The Exhortation to the Greeks; The Rich Man's Salvation*, Loeb Classical Library edition, ed. G. W. Butterworth, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960, p.346 cited by McGrath, op. cit., p.407.)

<sup>84</sup> McGrath, op. cit., p.407.

<sup>85</sup> Abelard cited by McGrath, op. cit., p.407. (No further reference provided by McGrath.)

of clarity in the means of atonement. There appears to be a barrier of ‘forgivability’ in man, which is crossed when the man realises the extent of God’s love.

As a further weakness, the Moral Influence theory ignores both the wrath of God (mentioned earlier) and that stream of teaching that centres the Atonement on the sacrifice of Christ. Notice that the teaching in 1 John regarding God’s love is that he ‘loved man and sent his Son as an *atonement sacrifice* for man’s sins.’<sup>86</sup> These verses do not read, ‘the expression of God’s love in the sending of his son is his atoning work’

Vincent Taylor notes the lack of any such teaching among the passion sayings of Jesus: ‘at no point does he put forward the view that he dies to express, embody or reveal the love of God... In all that he said and taught, there is nothing to suggest that His object in dying was to confront men with the untiring love of God.’<sup>87</sup>

The most common criticism of this view centres on the unproductiveness of the Cross, as in this view Jesus’ death accomplishes nothing though it is such a great act.<sup>88</sup> A common analogy made is that it’s all very well for a man to show his love for a child by rushing into a burning house, but it is absurd if the child is not trapped in the house at all, but is safely outside. Morris comments, “If sinners were in no danger on account of their sin, then why should Jesus have died at all? In that case we need an act of revelation, but not an act of atonement. It seems that no understanding of the cross is going to be satisfactory that does not view the death of Christ as accomplishing something. The New Testament speaks of redemption, reconciliation, propitiation, the making of a new covenant, justification, and more. In the face of such evidence it is impossible to reduce the atonement to a demonstration of something that was always true.”<sup>89</sup>

It is interesting to note the lack of teaching regarding the resurrection in most theories: the ancient Christus Victor view had the resurrection playing a somewhat embarrassing role, and the other major theories didn’t seem to mention it at all. The New Testament sometimes links the resurrection of Jesus with the eventual resurrection of all to judgement ‘at the end of the age,’<sup>90</sup> and also claims that believers ‘are buried with Christ in baptism, and raised with him in their faith.’<sup>91</sup> It

seems most natural, however, to attribute to the resurrection a victory, certainly a victory over death, but also a victory of glory and exultation in the risen Christ.<sup>92</sup>

In concluding, it seems that the only theory to represent all the Biblical streams of teaching examined is that of a vicarious sacrifice. It is only in this view that the teachings of sacrifice, ransom, love, victory and faith are found to be in some form of balance with the diverse, yet eternal, character of God. Not only do the Moral Influence and the Christus Victor views ignore the sacrificial terminology, the sacrificial imagery and indeed the explicit sacrificial teaching throughout the Bible, they also promote features that Scripture presents as the cause and a result of the Atonement to instead act as the *means* of the Atonement: the Moral Influence view emphasises the love of God to the point where he no longer shows his love in the act of reconciling the world to himself, but reconciles the world to himself through the showing of his love; and the Christus Victor view elevates the notion of victory to a point where the Atonement is no longer simply a victory in the successful reconciliation of man and God, but that the reconciliation of man and God is the result of a victory.

God’s love and a victory won, still form an important part of the Biblical teaching of the Atonement. God’s love compelled him to send his son as a vicarious sacrifice, to take the punishment and guilt deserved by man and allow man in turn to take his own righteousness by faith, and be reconciled by forgiveness to God. So it is the Cross as a vicarious sacrifice that solves the problem of sin and hence secures a victory over both sin and death.

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<sup>86</sup> 1 John 4:10.

<sup>87</sup> Vincent Taylor, *Jesus and His Sacrifice*, Macmillan & Co., London, 1939, p.302.

<sup>88</sup> Baillie comments on Soteriological theories in general: “But any knowledge of Christ, or any Christology, which cannot show how it makes a vital difference, and brings ‘saving benefits’ to our human situation, must be more than suspect.” (Baillie, op. cit., p.159.)

<sup>89</sup> Morris, *The Cross of Jesus*, op. cit., p.21.

<sup>90</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4:14.

<sup>91</sup> Colossians 2:12, 3:1.

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<sup>92</sup> Mark 16:6, Acts 2:31ff. & Romans 1:1-4.

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