Proceedings of the Los Angeles Theology Conference

This is the third volume in a series published by Zondervan Academic. It is the proceedings of the Los Angeles Theology Conference held under the auspices of the Torrey Honors Institute at Biola University, with the support of Fuller Theological Seminary, in January 2015. The conference is an attempt to do several things. First, it provides a regional forum in which scholars, students, and clergy can come together to discuss and reflect upon central doctrinal claims of the Christian faith. It is also an ecumenical endeavor. Bringing together theologians from a number of different schools and confessions, the LATC seeks to foster serious engagement with Scripture and tradition in a spirit of collegial dialogue (and disagreement), looking to retrieve the best of the Christian past in order to forge theology for the future. Finally, each volume in the series focuses on a central topic in dogmatic theology. It is hoped that this endeavor will continue to fructify contemporary systematic theology and foster a greater understanding of the historic Christian faith among the members of its different communions.

LOCATING ATONEMENT
EXPLORATIONS IN CONSTRUCTIVE DOGMATICS
Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders
General Editors

Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders, Editors

Locating Atonement

Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics

CONTRIBUTORS

Bruce McCormack • Michael Horton
Matthew Levering • Eleonore Stump • Benjamin Myers

ZONDERVAN®

ZONDERVAN

Locating Atonement
Copyright © 2015 by Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders

This title is also available as a Zondervan ebook. Visit www.zondervan.com/ebooks.

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 *Sparks Drive SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Locating atonement : explorations in constructive dogmatics / Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders, general editors.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-310-52116-7 (softcover)
1. Atonement—Congresses. I. Crisp, Oliver, editor.
BT265.3.L63 2015 2015
232'.3—dc23 2015021605

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.

Other Bible versions quoted in this book are listed on page 12, which hereby becomes a part of this copyright page.

Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design: Tammy Johnson
Cover photo: © Peter Barritt/Superstock.com
Interior design: Matthew Van Zomeren and Ben Fetterley

Printed in the United States of America

15 16 17 18 19 20 /DCI/ 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Kevin Vanhoozer,
Theologian of the Drama of Salvation

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments 9

Contributors 10

Abbreviations and Bible Versions 12

Introduction — Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders 13

1. THE PLACE OF THE CROSS AMONG THE INSEPARABLE OPERATIONS OF THE TRINITY 21
Adonis Vidu

2. CREATION AND ATONEMENT 43
Matthew Levering

3. THE PATRISTIC ATONEMENT MODEL 71
Benjamin Myers

4. ATONING WISDOM
The Wisdom of God in the Way of Salvation 89
Kyle Strobel and Adam J. Johnson

5. ATONEMENT AND COVENANT
Binding Together Aspects of Christ's Work 101
Jeremy R. Treat

6. ATONEMENT IN GETHSEMANE
The Necessity of Dyothelitism for the Atonement 118
R. Lucas Stamps

7. ATONEMENT AND THE CONCEPT OF PUNISHMENT 139
Daniel J. Hill and Joseph Jedwab

CONTRIBUTORS

Stephen T. Davis—is professor at Claremont McKenna College, in Claremont, CA. He holds a BA from Whitworth University, an MDiv from Princeton Theological Seminary, a PhD from Claremont Graduate University, and the LHD (doctor of humane letters) from Whitworth University.

Daniel J. Hill—is lecturer in philosophy at Liverpool University, UK. He holds a BA from Oxford University and an MA and PhD from King's College, University of London.

Michael Horton—is professor of theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Escondido, CA. He has a BA from Biola University, an MA from Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, and a PhD from Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and Coventry University, UK.

Joseph Jedwab—is assistant professor of philosophy, Kutztown University, PA. His BA is from King's College, London, and his MPhil and DPhil are from Oxford University.

Adam J. Johnson—is assistant professor in the Torrey Honors Institute, Biola University. He received his BA from Biola University, his MA from Talbot Theological Seminary at Biola University, his MDiv from Princeton Theological Seminary, and his PhD from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

Matthew Levering—is the James and Mary D. Perry Jr. Professor of Theology at Mundelein Seminary, Chicago. He has a BA from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, an MTS from Duke University, and a PhD from Boston College.

T. Mark McConnell—is lecturer in the School of Theology, Laidlaw College, Auckland, New Zealand. He earned his BSc degree from Glasgow Caledonian University, his LLB and MEd degrees from the University of Aberdeen, an MDiv from Regent College, Vancouver, BC, and a PhD from London School of Theology.

Bruce L. McCormack—is Charles Hodge Professor of Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary. He received his BA from Point Loma Nazarene University, his MDiv from Nazarene Theological Seminary, and his PhD from Princeton Theological Seminary.

Benjamin Myers—is lecturer in systematic theology at the School of Theology, Charles Stuart University, in Sydney, Australia. He has a BA and PhD from James Cook University.

R. Lucas Stamps—is assistant professor of Christian studies at California Baptist University, Riverside, CA. He holds a BA from Auburn University. His MDiv and PhD degrees are from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Kyle C. Strobel—is assistant professor at Biola University and research associate at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa. He holds a BA from Judson University, two MA degrees in New Testament and philosophy of religion and ethics from Talbot School of Theology at Biola University, and a PhD from the University of Aberdeen.

Eleonore Stump—is Robert J. Henle Professor of Philosophy at St. Louis University. She received a BA in classical languages from Grinnell College, an MA in biblical studies from Harvard University, and an MA and PhD in medieval studies from Cornell University.

Jeremy R. Treat—is a Pastor for Preaching and Vision at Reality LA, a church in Los Angeles, and adjunct professor of theology at Biola University. He received his PhD in theology from Wheaton College.

Adonis Vidu—is associate professor of theology, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Wenham, MA. He has a BA from Emmanuel Bible Institute, an MPhil from Babes-Bolyai University, and a PhD in theology from the University of Nottingham, UK.

Eric T. Yang—is visiting assistant professor at Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, CA. He received his PhD in philosophy from the University of California, Santa Barbara.

that required that original sin incur the punishment of death, a retributive punishment. Aquinas and Athanasius (and Anselm) fundamentally agree when it comes to viewing Jesus' death in light of the reciprocity code and retributive punishment, even though this is only one of the lenses through which Aquinas and Athanasius interpret Jesus' death.

At the heart of this agreement is the New Testament testimony that, in Paul's words, "we are now justified by his blood" (Rom 5:9). It is in Jesus that "all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col 1:19–20); and it is this same Jesus who "is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created" (Col 1:15–16). Atonement and creation must be held together.

Graham McFarlane, therefore, rightly emphasizes that "it is proper to locate the drama of redemption within the stage of creation. We do so because our understanding of creation provides the blueprint for redemption and therefore informs what can and cannot be said about the means by which the pathology may be redressed and redeemed."[99] Among the paths for understanding Jesus' merciful death for our sins, a central one is marked by the justice inscribed in the sheer gift of creation.

99. McFarlane, "Atonement, Creation and Trinity," 197.

CHAPTER 3

THE PATRISTIC ATONEMENT MODEL

BENJAMIN MYERS

I. NO EXPLANATION?

In his 2014 Annual Analytic Theology Lecture in San Diego, Oliver Crisp left his audience quite exercised after demonstrating that purported atonement theories are often only restatements instead of explanations.[1] They assert *that* the atonement happens without explaining *how*. To that extent they are not really atonement theories at all. They are, one might say, kerygma instead of theology. For something to qualify as a theory, it would have to explain how the thing actually works.

In a 1995 study on the atonement, Michael Winter drew attention to this problem in a withering excursus titled "No Explanation: Agreed."[2] Here he observed that modern theologians, no matter how great their disagreement over the nature of the atonement, are united in their principled refusal to explain how the atonement works. The insistence of F. W. Dillistone is representative of a wider mood: "The 'how' of this operation remains a mystery."[3] In Winter's opinion, modern theologians have been far too easily contented with "restatements" rather than "explanations" of the atonement, an approach that is hard to justify at a time when so many

1. Forthcoming as Oliver D. Crisp, "Is Ransom Enough?" *Journal of Analytic Theology* 3 (Spring 2015): 1–11.
2. Michael Winter, *The Atonement* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 30–37.
3. F. W. Dillistone, *The Christian Understanding of the Atonement* (London: Nisbet, 1968), 177; cited in Winter, *The Atonement*, 33.

objections to the atonement have been posed by both secular and religious writers.[4]

Gustaf Aulén has been influential here. The aim of his book, *Christus Victor*, was to show the superiority of the patristic atonement model over later Catholic, evangelical, and liberal Protestant approaches. Aulén praised the patristic model for its lack of clarity and consistency. Unlike its theological competitors, the patristic model has no mechanism. It "defies systematization."[5] It is too rich for rational accounting. Aulén did not only mean that this model was hard to understand. He believed that patristic teaching on the atonement was internally contradictory. It involves, he said, "an antinomy which cannot be resolved by a rational statement."[6]

By contrast, Aulén implied that the Anselmian model is disreputable precisely because it is "in its very structure a rational theory."[7] Aulén's refusal to systematise his patristic *Christus Victor* model has recently led Kathryn Tanner to observe, quite rightly, that "*Christus Victor* is not a model [of atonement] at all in that it fails ... to address the question of the mechanism of the atonement."[8] But this was hardly an oversight on Aulén's part, since one aim of his book was to foster a distrust of atonement mechanisms. His approach, with its underlying northern-European-Lutheran assumptions about the perfidious unreliability of reason, has done much to shape subsequent discussions of the atonement. When it comes to thinking about the death of Christ, precision and intelligibility have come to be regarded as deficits. The best atonement model, apparently, would be the one that is least capable of explanation.

In this paper I wish to present an alternative to Aulén's interpretation of early Christian theology. I will argue that Christian antiquity did indeed develop what could be called (with obvious anachronism) an atonement model. I will try to show that this model is capable of rational explanation: it has its own precise atonement mechanism driven by its own metaphysical gears. This model, I will argue, is not only more coherent than anything described by Aulén; it is also far richer in its christology and its vision of the human condition.

4. Winter, *The Atonement*, 35.
5. Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (London: SPCK, 1931), 107.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 75.
8. Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 253.

II. The Model

I begin by stating the patristic atonement model in outline. Implied metaphysical assumptions are stated in the form M:

(1) Humanity, created in the image of God, is loved by God.
(M1) There is one human nature. All individual human beings participate in this universal. *(Realism.)*
(2) But human nature has succumbed to the power of death.
(M2) Death is not a positive quality but a privation of being. *(Privation.)*
(3) To rescue humanity from its plight, God needs to retrieve human beings from the state of death.
(4) But God is unable to enter a state of death, i.e., to undergo privation from being.
(M3) The divine nature is infinite life and fullness, incapable of suffering or change. *(Impassibility.)*
(5) What is God to do?
(6) In Christ, God becomes incarnate: the divine nature is united with human nature.
(M4) Exactly how this union occurs is unknowable. *(Hypostatic union.)*
(7) In this union, each nature retains its own distinctiveness while participating in the properties of the other. Christ's human nature (without compromising its humanness) is filled with divine life; and the divine nature (without compromising its impassibility) is able to enter the privation of death.
(8) When Christ's human nature succumbs to death, the fullness of divine life enters the privative state of death. As a result, the privation is filled, i.e., cancelled out. In the death of Christ, death dies. *(The mechanism.)*
(9) Christ's resurrection is the inevitable consequence of his death. The suffering, dying Christ shows the union of the divine nature with a human nature subject to death; the resurrected Christ shows the union of the divine nature with a human nature no longer subject to death.
(10) What happens to human nature in Christ happens to humanity as a whole, because of (M1). *(The universal effect.)*
(11) Human nature is now freed from the power of death and is restored to its created position. This is a Good Thing. *(The solution.)*

(12) Human nature is now united to God and receives benefits far surpassing its created position. This is a Very Good Thing. *(The surplus.)*

Even from this bare outline it will be clear that the metaphysical assumptions are not window dressing. The assumptions of realism (M1) and the nature of death (M2) and divine impassibility (M3) are all essential for the functioning of the model. I will not be exploring (M4) in this paper, but it is important to keep this point in mind because it draws a clear line between the knowable bits of this model and the unknowable bits. Discussions of the atonement can too easily be short-circuited by premature appeals to mystery. At the first sign of difficulty there is always someone ready to throw up their hands and say, "We just don't know how it all happens, and that's that."

There is an admirable clarity in the way patristic thinkers distinguished between the things that *are* knowable and the things that *aren't*. Virtually nobody in Christian antiquity thought it was possible to understand the hypostatic union; but they did believe it was possible to understand the atonement. That is enough about (M4). In the rest of this paper I will consider the other three metaphysical assumptions in reverse order: divine nature as impassible, death as a privation, and human nature as a universal.

III. Divine Impassibility

One seldom finds patristic writers defending or even explaining the idea of divine impassibility. They take it for granted as something that is entailed in the idea of God. But impassibility is critical to the way they understand the economy of salvation. Divine impassibility is the reason for the incarnation. Athanasius spells out this logic in his treatise *On the Incarnation*. Because of the fall, human beings need to be rescued from their "corruptibility," their tendency toward death and decay (using Paul's term φθορά from 1 Cor 15:42). The Son of God saw that someone would need to die if humanity was to be rescued from death. Yet here the Son encounters the problem of his own impassibility. As Athanasius puts it, "Yet being immortal and the Son of the Father, the Word was not able to die."[9] The solution to this problem was the incarnation. "For this reason he takes to

9. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, Greek/English edition, trans. John Behr (Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), §9.

himself a body capable of death."[10] The Son becomes incarnate so that he will be able to die. He dies to snatch humanity back from death.

Cyril of Alexandria develops the same argument, with special attention to the communication of attributes between the two natures of Christ. Because each nature participates in the properties of the other, it is true to say that God undergoes suffering and death, even though the divine nature remains unchanged by the ordeal. Cyril writes:

> This was a matter of the salvation of the whole world. And since on this account [the Son] wished to suffer, even though he was beyond the power of suffering in his nature as God . . . he wrapped himself in flesh that was capable of suffering, and revealed it as his very own, so that even the suffering might be said to be his because it was his own body which suffered and no one else's.[11]

And again:

> He made his very own a body capable of tasting death and capable of coming back to life again, so that he himself might remain impassible and yet be said to suffer in his flesh.[12]

The incarnation is not only a solution to the problem of human sin and death. It is a solution to the problem of divine impassibility. It allows God to drink the cup of human suffering to the dregs while still remaining God. God is touched by suffering without being changed by it. Or in Cyril's paradoxical expression, God "suffers human things impassibly" (πάθοι ἀπαθῶς).[13]

Death, after all, is harmless to the divine nature. According to Gregory of Nyssa, just as you can easily touch water without harm, so it is easy—in fact, "infinitely easier"—for the divine nature to touch death without suffering harm.[14] The problem is for God to find a way to make contact with death at all, since God cannot simply jump on the slippery slide into nonbeing. God cannot create a rock so heavy that even God cannot lift it, and by the same logic God cannot use the divine power to make the divine nature subject to nonbeing.

10. Ibid., §9; cf. §20.
11. Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. John Anthony McGuckin (Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 118.
12. Ibid., 127.
13. Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Right Faith*, trans. Rowan A. Greer, http://www.yale.edu/adhoc/etexts/cyril.htm.
14. Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Oration*, ed. James Herbert Strawley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 35; English translation in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward Rochie Hardy (Library of Christian Classics; London: SCM, 1954).

The early Christian tradition would have agreed with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's celebrated saying that "only the suffering God can help."[15] But while modern theologians have used this insight to attack the idea of divine impassibility, patristic theologians used it to defend the incarnation. From the standpoint of early Christian thought, a divine nature capable of suffering would be no help at all, since it would mean (a) that God had not really shared in the *human* plight, but only in some divine version of it; and (b) that God is unable to transform death into life, since God would be subject to death as though to an equal or superior power. Only an incorruptible, life-giving divine nature united to corruptible human nature is able both to share fully in the human plight and to overcome it. Gregory of Nazianzus sounds almost like Bonhoeffer when he exclaims, "We needed a God made flesh and made dead, that we might live."[16] The Son's human nature is the doorway into death, but what steps through that door is the life-giving Word who, by his mere presence, turns death into life.

IV. Death and Privation

This connection between divine impassibility and human corruptibility has brought us into the inner workings of the patristic atonement model. Human mortality is reversed when the life-giving divine nature makes contact with human nature at the point of its collapse into nonbeing. If the slide toward nonbeing is reversed, then death has become life, which is another way of saying that death has died. In the words of Gregory of Nyssa, "When death came into contact with life, darkness with light, corruption with incorruption, the worse of these things disappeared into a state of non-existence."[17] The metaphysical assumption (M1) stated above, that death is a privation of being, is critical to this view of salvation. Nonbeing is cancelled out when it is touched by the life-giving Creator. Death is defeated not in the manner of a combat: you cannot wrestle with a privation. Death ceases in the same way that darkness ceases whenever the light is turned on.

It is true that early Christian teachers, especially in their preaching, like to use vivid mythical language to describe Christ's triumph over the

15. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010), 479.

16. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 45.28; translation in *Festal Orations*, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison (Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008).

17. Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Oration*, 26.

power of death and hell. Gustaf Aulén was so far led astray by such mythic language as to conclude that the early church viewed the atonement as a "combat" between God and Satan. It is hard to imagine a more extravagant misunderstanding of early Christian teaching.

Already in the second century, Christian writers had developed complex metaphysical refutations of the ideas that evil exists as a positive entity and that evil could have a spooky ontological status alongside God, so that God would have to combat it. Successive generations of anti-Marcionite, anti-gnostic, and anti-Manichaean polemics hammered home the axiomatic convictions that evil is not a positive thing in its own right but a privation of being, and that this privation occurs among creatures, not on a transcendent plane alongside God. When the early Christians identified the demons as fallen angels, they were making a polemical point. They were not glorifying the demons by comparing them to angels; they were demoting the demons from the quasi-divine status that they enjoyed in Hellenistic culture. Christianity relegated the demons to the lowly office of wayward creatures within God's world.

It is intriguing to notice how many early Christian teachers regarded the demons not with grisly awe but with something closer to sympathy. Augustine's treatment of the demons in the first half of the *City of God* straddles the boundary between pity and contempt, while Origen and Gregory of Nyssa speculated that the fallen angels would probably be saved in the end. They are creatures, after all, so why shouldn't they be redeemed along with the rest of creation?

While early Christian theology had a large and colorful demonology, it was a demonology contained within definite metaphysical limits. The demons do not play a leading role in Christian accounts of creation or redemption. God is not preoccupied with them or engaged in struggle against them. Instead, it is *believers* who have to struggle against the demons. This struggle takes two main forms: the spiritual life of believers is marked by struggle against the demons (a central theme of Christian monastic literature); and the geographical spread of Christianity involves the progressive displacement of the gods of Hellenistic polytheism, understood to be demons (a central theme of apologetic literature).

Athanasius draws attention to the demons in both of these contexts. His *Life of Antony* is filled with demons, but it is Antony, not God, who does battle with them. In his treatise on the incarnation, Athanasius first develops his account of the incarnation and atonement and then offers two proofs that death has been defeated. First, the lives of the Christian

martyrs prove that death has lost its power, since the martyrs are not afraid of dying;[18] and second, the spread of Christianity among Hellenistic peoples proves that Christ is alive and that, compared to him, all the gods and demons are nothing.[19]

> The gods and the demons . . . fall dead at the advent of Christ, their show being futile and empty; but by the sign of the cross all magic ceases, all witchcraft is brought to nothing, all idols are deserted and abandoned.[20]

The atonement is not a struggle against Satan but a defeat of death, and the visible, tangible proof of death's defeat is the existence of the church with its powerful twin engines of martyrdom and exorcism. In so far as there is a combat, it is strictly an intra-creaturely affair. God is the creator, not a combatant.

Gustaf Aulén was right to note that the ancient Christians often depicted the atonement in striking visual and mythic language. In one sermon, John Chrysostom compares death to a hungry dragon. The dragon swallowed up Christ, not knowing that Christ's mortal body was a poisoned bait. This poison brought on violent stomach cramps, even worse (so Chrysostom assures us) than the agony of a woman in labor. The dragon writhed in pain, then vomited. "He received the body which he could not digest, and so he had to throw it up again."[21] The same food metaphor is used in the famous paschal homily attributed to Chrysostom, where Hades is said to be embittered by the "taste" of Christ's flesh. The point of this metaphor is not to show that Christ defeated the Devil through trickery; it is death, not the Devil, that is personified in the homily. Swallowing a human body, death discovers that it has also swallowed God. Because of the union of natures in Christ, it is possible for the impassible divine nature to enter death and to overcome it from within. The paschal homily makes this quite explicit when it says of hades: "It took a body and discovered God; it took earth and encountered heaven; it took what it saw, but crumbled before what it had not seen."[22]

Probably the best known metaphorical account of the atonement from Christian antiquity is Gregory of Nyssa's fishhook analogy. Most readers

18. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 27–29.
19. Ibid., 30–32.
20. Ibid., 31.
21. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, 24.7; translation in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, first series, vol. 12, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).
22. "Paschal Homily," in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: 1857–1886), volume 59, col. 721.

of *Christus Victor* will recall this analogy, if nothing else, since Aulén bases so much of his account on Gregory's fishhook. In Aulén's view, Gregory depicts a conflict between God and Satan; in this conflict, God resorts to guerrilla tactics and overcomes Satan's power through a grand deception. Christ was the hook and Satan took the bait.

I have stated that early Christian teaching sees death, and not the Devil, as the basic human problem from which we have to be redeemed. And I have stated that death was understood as a privation, not as a positive thing in its own right. Both of these claims are supported by the fishhook passage in Gregory's *Catechetical Oration*. The *Christus Victor* interpretation misses both of these critical points. Here is the passage in question:

> The opposing power could not, by its nature, come into immediate contact with God's presence and endure the unveiled sight of him. Hence it was that God, in order to make himself easily accessible to him who sought the ransom for us, veiled himself in our nature. In that way, as it is with greedy fish, he might swallow the Godhead like a fishhook along with the flesh, which was the bait. Thus, when life came to dwell with death and light shone upon darkness, their contraries might vanish away. For it is not in the nature of darkness to endure the presence of light, nor can death exist where life is active.[23]

Aulén is right to note that the *Catechetical Oration* develops an elaborate mythic picture of a ransom paid to the Devil. But when Gregory comes down to explaining what his mythic picture is all about, two things become clear: first, that the real problem is not Satan but death; and second, that death is not a rival that God has to contend with, but only a privation of life. In fact, one of Gregory's major preoccupations in this oration is the privation theory of evil—an irony, given the way the fishhook passage has been used to support Aulén's dualistic picture of a combat between God and the Devil. Toward the beginning of the oration, Gregory explains that evil is nothing but the absence of good, just as darkness is the absence of light. He takes pains to reject any notion of a dualism between good and evil, explaining:

> We must not think of virtue as opposed to vice in the way of two existing phenomena. To illustrate: nonbeing is opposed to being; but we cannot say that the latter is opposed to the former as something existing in its own right. Rather we say that there is a logical opposition between what

23. Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Oration*, 24.

> does not exist and what exists. . . . Again, we say that blindness is logically opposed to sight. But blindness does not by nature have real existence. On the contrary it is the privation of a former capacity.[24]

Gregory's point could hardly be clearer. Evil is not a reality but a "privation" (στέρησις). It appears in the world "just as a shadow follows the withdrawal of the sun's rays."[25]

In the fishhook passage, Gregory uses an analogy to show that salvation can be understood as the removal of a privation. His point is that the union of natures in Christ allows the divine nature to enter into a state of privation, thus immediately cancelling out that privation. Tellingly, Gregory does not speak here of God's victory over death; he simply says that death "vanishes" in the presence of life.[26] Athanasius had similarly concluded his account of the atonement with the remark that "death has been dissolved."[27] And though he uses Aulén-like language at this point, describing believers' "victory" (νίκη) over death, his point is not that Christ has struggled victoriously against death's power but that believers experience victory now that death has been dissolved. Metaphysically, death is cancelled out in the way that shadows are removed by light; experientially, this is a "victory" for believers.

The language of victory is valid, therefore, as long as it is clear that this is not a *divine* victory. It is not God who engages in combat. Gregory's fishhook analogy was contrived to explain the mechanism by which an impassible, life-giving divine nature enters into the privation of death, so that privation is dispelled by the presence of life. It is an extended metaphor to illustrate the way the union of natures in Christ makes possible the descent of the divine nature into a state of privation. Aulén's mistake was to skip over the explicit metaphysical parts of Gregory's oration and to attach alien metaphysical meanings to the metaphorical parts. The resulting *Christus Victor* model, marked as it is by combat and dualism, is barely recognisable as an interpretation of early Christian teaching.

Combat language, as far as I can tell, figured more prominently in the Syrian tradition than in the Greek or Latin. But Syrian writers and preachers stressed the fact that the language of combat does not apply to God. There can be no combat between the divine nature and anything

24. Ibid., 6.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 24.
27. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 27.

else, otherwise the distinction between creator and creation would be meaningless. Perhaps the most extensive use of combat language in all patristic literature is found in Jacob of Sarug's homilies "on our Lord's combat with Satan." The homilies give an extremely warlike depiction of Christ's temptation in the wilderness. Satan is portrayed as the leader of a vast army. The demons engage Christ on the battlefield and he defeats them. But Jacob repeatedly reminds his hearers that it was only Christ's human nature that struggled against Satan:

> He became a human and as a human Son he did battle.
> His contest with Satan was a human one:
> Let no one say that he was fighting divinely.[28]

Christ recapitulates Adam's temptation; it is as a human being that he overcomes the Devil. He does this as an example for his followers so that they will know how to stand firm against temptation. There is no cosmic battle between God and evil. In fact, even as a human being Christ cannot really be said to be fighting anything. The warlike language in these homilies is used almost exclusively to describe Satan's tactics. It is Satan who gathers an army and prepares his strategies; it is Satan who mounts a campaign against Christ. By contrast, the homilies present Christ as gentle, peaceable, and soft-spoken. He responds to Satan's attacks not with counterattacks but with "humility," "serenity," and "a gentle struggle." "He did not act with strength," Jacob says, but with "wisdom."[29] Satan is full of sound and fury, but Christ responds simply by quoting Scripture "in whispers, not shouts."[30] Paradoxically, the combat language in these homilies is used to show that there is no true combat between Christ and Satan. Only from Satan's deluded perspective does it look like a combat at all. Christ has no need to fight against anything. Even in his human nature, he overcomes evil more in the manner of a light that dispels the shadows simply by shining. Such is the subtle and suggestive use of combat language in early Christian theology. Compared to this, Aulén's notion of a "divine warfare against the evil that holds mankind in bondage"[31] seems not only theologically unsupportable but also a rather crude and heavy-handed use of metaphor.

28. Jacob of Sarug, *Mêmrâ* 82.62–64; Syriac and English translation in *Jacob of Sarug's Homilies on Jesus' Temptation*, ed. Adam Carter McCollum (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014).
29. Ibid., 126.249–53.
30. Ibid., 126.265.
31. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 163.

The language of hell or hades, so pervasive in Christian antiquity, was also liable to be disciplined by a metaphysical commitment to the privation theory of evil. It is true that Christians tended to describe hades as a place. Such spatial language is hard to avoid, especially given the New Testament's spatial motif of Christ's "descent" to the dead and subsequent "ascension."[32]

But Gregory of Nyssa pointed out that such spatial language is best understood as a metaphorical description of spiritual realities. In the dialogue on the soul and the resurrection, Macrina tells her brother Gregory that although hades is portrayed in Scripture as a place, "it is likely that this hades ... is not intended to signify a place with that name." Instead it refers to "some invisible and incorporeal condition of life, in which the soul lives."[33] Insofar as the soul is stretching out toward God, it is already in heaven, or at least on the way; insofar as the soul turns away from God, it is already dissolving into shadows. If "hades" designates not a quasi-transcendent world but such a state of spiritual privation, then the language of Christ's "victory" over death is likewise metaphorical. Death is not a power against which Christ has to struggle; it is an absence that Christ fills.

V. Realism and Human Nature

The early Christian atonement model also requires certain metaphysical assumptions about human nature. The view that humanity is essentially one—that there is a universal human nature in which individuals participate—is so widely taken for granted in early Christianity that it is seldom discussed or defended. This metaphysical realism has been attributed, like so many other things, to the influence of Platonic philosophy on early Christian thought.

It is true that a Platonic theory of universals had far-reaching influence on Hellenistic and Christian cultures. But Christian thought about human nature was drawn from deeper springs, especially from the Pauline Christ-Adam typology, which crystallised a vision of history around two

32. Writing in the second century, Tertullian sets out a geographical view of hell: "We Christians do not consider hell to be an empty cavern or some subterranean sewer of the world, but a profound and vast space hidden away in the deepest interior of the earth." And his proof for this view is the fact that Christ is said to have "descended" and "ascended." See *On the Soul*, 55.1–2; translation in *Apologetical Works and Minucius Felix Octavius* (Fathers of the Church; Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1950).

33. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 73.

universal articulations of human nature. In 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5, St. Paul lumps together the whole human race under two representative heads, Christ and Adam; and in both passages he specifically links the Christ-Adam typology to the universality of death. Few scriptural motifs left such an indelible impression on the imagination of the ancient church.[34]

Christian teachers used a variety of metaphors and analogies to depict Christ's impact on human nature. Irenaeus suggests that the unfolding history of human nature is like a single book, and that Christ is the précis that encompasses the whole story in brief.[35] Athanasius compares humanity to a town; one day the king decides to come and live there, and the whole town is dignified by its new resident. In the same way, the whole of humanity reaps the benefits when the Son of God takes up residence in our nature.[36] The sermons of Gregory of Nazianzus use examples from the kitchen to describe Christ's effect on human nature. Christ is compared to yeast in the dough or to a curdling agent in milk:

> He bears the title "Man" ... with the aim of hallowing humanity through himself, by becoming a sort of yeast for the whole lump. He has united with himself all that lay under condemnation, in order to release it from condemnation. For all our sakes he became all that we are, sin apart—body, soul, mind, all that death pervades.[37]
>
> Yet none is like the wonder of my salvation: a few drops of blood recreate the whole world and become for all human beings like a curdling agent for milk, binding and drawing us together into one.[38]

In another analogy, closer to the language of St. Paul, Gregory of Nyssa compares the human race to a single corpse that Christ brings back to life:

> Our whole nature had to be brought back from death. In consequence he stooped down to our dead body and stretched out a hand, as it were, to one who was prostrate. He approached so near death as to come into contact with it. With his own body he gave our nature the principle of resurrection, by raising our total humanity along with him by his power.[39]

34. For one aspect of the influence of the Christ-Adam typology on Christian literature, see Benjamin Myers, "A Tale of Two Gardens: Augustine's Narrative Interpretation of Romans 5," in *Apocalyptic Paul: Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5–8*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013), 39–58.

35. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, trans. Dominic J. Unger (Ancient Christian Writers; New York: Newman Press, 1992–2012), 3.18.

36. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 9.

37. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 30.21; translation in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham (Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002).

38. Ibid., *Oration* 45.29; translation in *Festal Orations*.

39. Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Oration*, 32.

These passages show how flexibly Christian writers and preachers could *illustrate* the unity of human nature without necessarily trying to *explain* it in metaphysical terms. It was enough to have a working assumption of the essential oneness of human nature.

At times the language of sacrifice was used in the same way. In a frequently quoted passage, Athanasius describes Christ's death as a necessary sacrifice. He writes:

> Since what was required from all still had to be rendered (for, as I said earlier, it was absolutely necessary to die and for this, in particular, he sojourned among us), for this reason ... he now offered the sacrifice on behalf of all, delivering his own temple to death in the place of all, in order to make all not liable to and free from the ancient transgression, and to show himself superior to death, displaying his own body as incorruptible, the first-fruits of the universal resurrection.[40]

This is a classic passage in studies of the atonement, since the Athanasius of this passage is generally thought to have paved the way for Anselm and Calvin. He is said to supply all the key ingredients for the later development of penal substitutionary atonement theory. This interpretation assumes that Athanasius is describing the atonement mechanism in sacrificial terms. The problem with this interpretation is to explain how this mechanism, set out in just a few lines, fits with the rest of Athanasius's scheme, which does not seem to require penal or sacrificial concepts. But the passage appears in a very different light if we view it as a statement not of the atonement mechanism but of the universality of human nature.

One of the functions of sacrifice is to represent the relation between the one and the many. In sacrifice, one particular thing is offered on behalf of the many. The oneness of the community is symbolised and enacted in the sacrifice. When Athanasius wants to describe the atonement mechanism, he speaks at great length along the lines that I have been discussing: an impassible divine nature assumes mortal human nature in order to dispel death. But when he wants to describe the universal reach of Christ's death—the way one person affects the whole of human nature—he takes up the language of sacrifice.

In this passage, Athanasius is simply pointing out that Christ's death is for all. The word "all" chimes like a bell through the passage. This is not the part of the treatise that explains *how* the atonement works. It is a

40. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 20.

transitional point in the argument, and at this juncture Athanasius simply wants to state that Christ's death affects everyone. What happens in Christ happens to human nature as a whole. Even within this short passage, the language of temple and sacrifice flickers for a moment only to disappear again as soon as it has served its purpose of depicting universality. By the end of the passage Athanasius is back to his usual idiom of death's defeat by an incorruptible divine nature. *That* is the atonement mechanism; the sacrificial language is used to show that the mechanism affects human nature as a whole.

There is a second sacrificial passage in *On the Incarnation*. Again it figures prominently in modern writing on the atonement, and again the sacrificial language is viewed as a step on the way to later theories of penal substitution. But the real function of Athanasius's sacrificial language is even clearer in this context:

> So by offering to death the body he had taken to himself, as an offering holy and free of all spot, he immediately abolished death from all like him, by the offering of a like. For ... by offering his own temple and his bodily instrument as a substitute for all, [the Word] fulfilled in death what was required; and, being united with all human beings by a body like theirs, the incorruptible Son of God consequently clothed all with incorruptibility.[41]

It is remarkable that this passage is so often judged as being proto-Anselmian in spite of the fact that it depicts Christ as a sacrifice offered *to death*, not to God. The assumption that Athanasius is describing an atonement mechanism leads the reader immediately into a thicket of absurdities. How can a sacrifice be offered to death? Do human beings owe a debt to death? Is death a transcendent being that needs to be placated? But as soon as we change perspective and see the passage as a depiction not of the atonement mechanism but of its universal effects, then the difficulties vanish. Christ has come to get rid of death for everyone, to bring about a change to human nature as a whole. His defeat of death affects everybody, just as a sacrifice or a temple benefits the whole group through a single offering.

The question Athanasius is answering is not *how* the atonement works, but *for whom*. That is why the sacrifice passage is immediately followed by another very different analogy: the passage I mentioned earlier, in which

41. Ibid., 9.

a whole town is affected when a king takes up residence there. Neither of these analogies—the sacrifice or the town with the king—is meant to be taken too literally, and neither of them is describing a mechanism of how Christ's death saves. They are both used as illustrations to remind the reader that what happens in Christ happens for the benefit of the whole of humanity.

Returning for a moment to my outline of the early Christian atonement model, one can conclude that sacrificial language is used not for (8) (the mechanism proper), but for (10) (the universality of the atonement). This is not to suggest that sacrificial language is unimportant. Such language has a place, as the passages from Athanasius show. The language of sacrifice is used to depict the way humanity as a whole is included in whatever happens to Christ. The sacrificial passages in Athanasius should be a reminder of how easy it is for modern readers to project their Anselmian and Calvinist assumptions back onto early Christian sources. When this happens, the outlines of the patristic model are distorted, and the patristic atonement mechanism tends to vanish completely.

VI. The Solution and the Surplus

I have outlined the patristic model in a series of propositions and have tried to elucidate the three metaphysical assumptions that operate like hidden gears within this model. Let me now briefly restate the model in a way that draws attention to its overall shape.

Human beings are the products of love. They are created in God's image for the purpose of reciprocating divine love. Human nature, motivated by an internal principle of desire, tends naturally upward toward God. Since God is the source of all life, to be lovingly moving toward God is to be alive. But to turn away from God, even for one second, is to begin to die: to slide downward, away from life, love, and reality.

Since the beginning of history, the whole human race has been locked in a downward slide toward nothingness. But because of his great love for humanity, the Son of God leapt down from heaven and wrapped himself in our plummeting human nature. Because he was human, he participated fully in our perilous slide toward nothingness. But because he was divine, he was able to arrest our downward movement and to reverse it, initiating an upward movement toward the life, love, and reality of God. In the movement of that one human life, the life of Christ, the whole of human nature has undergone death and resurrection.

One might depict this as a U-shaped drama. Humanity begins at a high point, then plummets down; then in Christ the line reaches its lowest point before curving back up again. But the upward line doesn't terminate at the top. Christ does not merely restore humanity to its original position. The upward line of the curve shoots much higher than its starting point. So far I have been considering only the negative side of the atonement: God's response to the human plight. But there is also a positive side: the upward arc that raises humanity higher than the place from which it fell. My outline of the patristic alludes to this positive side of the atonement when it distinguishes between the solution (11) and the surplus (12). It seems to me that most theological writing on the atonement stops with the solution. But if we think of the atonement only as a solution to a problem, then we are really only getting one half of the picture.

Earlier I quoted Athanasius's statement that the Son of God became incarnate in order to die. He needed to assume a mortal nature so that he could get access to death. That was the solution to the human problem. But Athanasius does not restrict his account to this solution. Later in his argument he explains that God's intention was not only to free human nature from death but also to elevate it to a new status. If Christ had only freed us from death, we would still remain corruptible by nature. We would still be *able* to die even if death had been warded off for the time being. "The principle of bodies," as Athanasius puts it, would still be mortal.[42] So the Son of God goes a step further. He not only removes us from the clutches of death but also allows our nature to participate in his own incorruptible life. He "interweaves" his life with ours.[43]

In a different metaphor, Cyril says that the Son's divine life has been "implanted" as a principle within human nature.[44] This is more than a solution to the human plight. It is a gift that surpasses nature. It elevates, sanctifies, and deifies. In addition to "escaping corruption," Cyril writes, "we rise up to an honor that is above our nature because of Christ."[45] This happens by means of exactly the same atonement mechanism. It is just the communication of attributes working in the other direction. Through the union of natures, the divine nature shares in the experience of death without ceasing to be divine and impassible, while dying human nature is suffused with divine life without ceasing to be human.

42. Ibid., 44.
43. Ibid.
44. Cyril, *Unity of Christ*, 125.
45. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, Ancient Christian Texts, vol. 1, trans. David R. Maxwell (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 60.

From this perspective, the surplus factor can be seen not as an implication or aftereffect of the atonement, the way sanctification is sometimes understood in Protestant theology. The surplus factor belongs to the atonement model proper. The mechanism works in two directions at the same time, communicating human qualities to the divine nature (so that God can enter death) and divine qualities to human nature (so that humanity is elevated to a new status).

In a sermon on Romans 5, John Chrysostom compared the human plight to a small debt. A man owes a few coins. When he cannot pay the debt, he is cast into prison along with his wife, children, and servants. His only hope is for someone to come and clear the debt. And that is what happens. A benefactor comes along and pays the small debt. The poor man's problems are solved, and he is overjoyed. But there is more. The benefactor is not content only to clear the prisoner's debts. In addition he gives the man ten thousand talents of gold, a vast fortune. And as if that were not enough, he leads him into the royal palace and gives him an introduction to the king. As a result, the man is elevated to the highest status in the land. And never again does the benefactor remind the man of the few coins that he had owed.

In this parable one can see where the real emphasis lies in the patristic understanding of the atonement. There is a solution: the payment of a few coins. And there is a surplus: ten thousand talents of gold and a position of honor in the royal palace. Chrysostom uses the language of debt, so familiar to us now from later atonement models. But his parable is worlds away from the kind of atonement theology that sees Christ's death as nothing more than a necessary payment. Chrysostom concludes: "For Christ paid off much more than we owed—as much more as a limitless ocean compared to a small drop of water."[46]

There is a solution and a surplus, and both are achieved by a single atonement mechanism. The richness of this early Christian model lies not only in its coherence and clarity but also in its refreshing breadth of vision: its sober assessment of human nature as well as its youthful optimism; its devotion to the death of Christ as well as its celebration of the resurrection; an attitude of humble gratitude as well as an audacity and freedom of spirit that come from believing that one is not only saved but also loved, not only debt-free but rich beyond imagining.

46. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, vol. 1, trans. Panayiotis Papageorgiou (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2013), 10.17–20.

CHAPTER 4

ATONING WISDOM

The Wisdom of God in the Way of Salvation

KYLE STROBEL AND ADAM J. JOHNSON

I. INTRODUCTION

The primary dogmatic location of the atonement is the doctrine of God; that is, the doctrines of the Trinity and of the divine attributes form the primary and determinative features of the doctrine of the atonement.[1] They create the room or structure within which other doctrines have their respective dignity, playing their distinct and valuable roles.

In this sense, the atonement is the doctrinal elaboration of the movement and action of God incarnate for us through death into resurrection; it is doctrinal reflection on who God is and how he is for us in the descent and exaltation of Christ. In this sense, the doctrine of the atonement is not as narrow as often understood, dominated by theories addressing the cross in relation to various features of sin.[2] Rather, the atonement names a specific movement of God with an explicit directionality—a *telos* that guides God's economic activity to save what was created *by* him, *through* him, and *for* him—that he might reconcile all things to himself (Col 1:15–20) by

1. For a fuller development of this thesis, see Adam J. Johnson, *Atonement: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T&T Clark, 2015); *God's Being in Reconciliation: The Theological Basis of the Unity and Diversity of the Atonement in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012).

2. Consider, for instance, the way that penal substitution emphasizes sin as guilt, and also consider Green and Baker's work to suggest the alternative emphasis on shame in chapter 6 of Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003).