

John Calvin, on the significance of Jesus' death:

'When it is asked how, after abolishing sins, Christ removed the discord between us and God and acquired a righteousness, it may be replied generally that he provided us with this by *the whole course of his obedience*...From the moment he put on the person of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation for our redemption...In order, however, to define the manner of salvation more surely, scripture ascribes it to Christ's death as its property and attribute. Yet there is no exclusion of the rest of the obedience which he performed in his life; as Paul comprehends the whole of it, from the beginning to the end, when he says, 'he made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross'...Nor was this without inward conflict, because he had taken our infirmities, and it was necessary to give this proof of his obedience to his Father. And it was no mean specimen of his incomparable love to us, to contend with horrible fear, and amid those dreadful torments to neglect all care of himself, that he might promote our benefit.'<sup>1</sup>

Calvin himself says that Jesus' life was atoning, not just his death. His whole life was the undoing of human sin and the forging of a new humanity in an actual human life. So anyone who says that Jesus' death alone is what matters in Calvinist theology isn't reading Calvin himself! In other places, Calvin makes this a subordinate part of the penal substitution atonement theory where Jesus absorbs the punishment for human guilt. Therefore he limits the atonement to the elect by the decree of the Father. He diverges from Irenaeus and Athanasius, (and the consensus of the first millennium of Christian thought), who saw Jesus as God's new humanity for all humanity, addressing the corruption in each one of us. But in this particular, limited instance, and for my purposes here, Calvin says it well.

For more information, look up 'Recapitulation' (in Irenaeus, etc.<sup>2</sup>) or 'Therapeutic Substitution' or the 'Physical Theory of Atonement' (in the Eastern Orthodox tradition<sup>3</sup>) or 'Total Substitution' and 'Real Exchange' (in the Reformed stream of Karl Barth and T.F. Torrance<sup>4</sup>; and represented by Catholics like J.R.R. Tolkien, Hans Urs von Balthazar, Thomas Weinandy, and Elenore Stump<sup>5</sup>). This understanding of Jesus' work is ontological and relational in its foundations, not merely legal or penal.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* 2.16.5

<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 3, ch.18.7; Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, chs.2 – 5; Augustine, *On the Trinity*, book 13, chs.11 – 16; John of Damascus, *Orthodoxy*, book 3, ch.14; Stanley P. Rosenberg, 'Interpreting Atonement in Augustine's Preaching', edited by Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James, *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), p.233 – 8; Gustav Aulen, *Christus Victor* (1930);

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), p.135 – 55; Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London, England: Pelican Books, 1997) p.221 – 5

<sup>4</sup> E.g. C.S. Lewis, 'The Perfect Penitent', *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: Collier Books, 1952), p.157; Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Helmets and Howard Publishers, 1992) and *Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), p.61 – 67; Thomas H. McCall, *Forsaken: The Trinity, the Cross, and Why it Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012); for helpful online messages, see Grace Communion International, <http://www.gci.org/yi>.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh* (T&T Clark: Edinburgh, 1993). For more information on the ontological substitution atonement theory, especially in contrast with other atonement theories, please see [http://nagasawafamily.org/archives\\_atonement.htm](http://nagasawafamily.org/archives_atonement.htm).