

C.S. Lewis' Theology of the Atonement

Mako A. Nagasawa

For Dr. Gary Deddo, *The Theological Thought of C.S. Lewis*, Fuller Seminary

Last modified: April 13, 2015; <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-cslewis-paper-atonement.pdf>

Questioning Lewis

When C.S. Lewis' story *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* opened in theaters in December 2005, the film generated a new wave of discussion about Lewis' theology of the atonement. Even before the movie was released, in the previous year, Time magazine (in April 2004) had run a cover story asking, 'Why Did Jesus Die?' The writers claimed that C.S. Lewis, based on his portrayal of the death of Aslan, was a proponent of the 'moral exemplar' or 'subjective' theory of the atonement. Jesus died to be a good example for us, and 'the lion Aslan, who stood in for Christ, was clearly a figure to be emulated.'

Other critics view Lewis' atonement theology, at least as portrayed in the death of Aslan, as representing the Christ Victor, or 'ransom', theory. The fact that Aslan died to trick the White Witch lends itself to this interpretation. So, too, the power of the breath of Aslan raised from the dead. The resurrected Aslan was able to breathe new life upon the statues of other creatures who had sided with the White Witch and then suffered at her hands, a motif of Jesus breathing his Holy Spirit upon his disciples only after his resurrection victory over sin and death (Jn.20:22).

Yet did Aslan die to satisfy his father, the Emperor-Across-the-Sea? Was the 'deep magic' written before the dawn of Narnian time a formula for satisfying the Emperor? Did the Emperor's demand coincide with the Witch's demand, that the traitor's life be forfeit? Since the Emperor's demand existed prior to the Witch's demand, was it actually the Emperor's demand that gave space to the Witch and legitimacy to her claim? Is this an intriguing analogy to the relation between God, Satan, and humanity? These questions go unanswered in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Some argued that Lewis was indeed a proponent of the substitutionary theory of atonement, specifically penal substitution. Peter J. Schakel said, 'The writers of the [Time magazine] article definitely miss the point...Aslan gives himself to the Witch as a sacrifice to make amends for Edmund's disobedience. By focusing on that theory, Lewis takes a stronger [Substitutionary] stand than he does in *Mere Christianity*.' Theologian Howard Worsely also states, regarding Aslan's death, 'The precise interpretation of the atonement is penal substitution.' Shanna Caughey, another Lewis aficionado, chimed in: 'This form of soteriology is called substitutional atonement.'

Confusingly, others faulted Lewis precisely for being *against* the penal substitution view. This may have been the more logical criticism given that he had expressed discomfort with penal substitution in his earlier book *Mere Christianity*. A statement by Martyn Lloyd-Jones originally published in *Christianity Today* in 1963 was recirculated: 'C.S. Lewis had a defective view of salvation and was an opponent of the substitutionary and penal view of the atonement.' John McArthur, commenting on Lewis' atonement theology as reported by Ariel James Vanderhorst in a recent article in *Touchstone* magazine, asserted that 'C. S. Lewis was no theologian.'¹

Vanderhorst argues that Lewis held some uncertainty about exactly how Jesus' death accomplished our salvation.² Hence, he views the death of Aslan as being portrayed as somewhat 'magical' or 'mythological.' Vanderhorst writes,

'In other words, Lewis was not particularly interested in systematic theology; his allegiances lay with what he regarded as the sacred heart of faith: the mysterious, "magical" grace that burst into the world through the Cross. Perhaps Lewis should have read Paul's epistles with greater frequency and attention; nevertheless, he saw his own mythic approach to the Cross as stemming directly from Christ's own reliance on story. Moreover, Lewis saw "theology," at least in a systematic sense, as inferior to myth. And in his own words, "The imaginative man in me is older, more continuously operative, and in that sense more basic than either the religious writer or the critic."³

¹ Ariel James Vanderhorst, 'Mere Atonement: C.S. Lewis & the Multiple Angles of Redemption', *Touchstone Magazine*, April 2009, volume 22, issue 3; <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=22-03-027-f#ixzz11A5a5imf>

² Ibid

³ Ibid

In this essay, I will examine Lewis' indebtedness to the dominant patristic theory of the atonement, which I have called the 'ontological substitution' theory. Eastern Orthodox theologians have called it the 'physical' theory of the atonement, although Father Stephen Freeman calls it the 'therapeutic substitutionary atonement,'⁴ although I would much prefer 'medical substitution.' T.F. Torrance upholds a view that is, to my understanding, very similar to it, if not identical; Torrance calls it 'total substitution' in contrast to 'penal substitution.'⁵ In essence, it is a view that says that the work of Christ *is* the person of Christ, and vice versa. By contrast, penal substitution holds that the person of Christ *is only the staging ground* for the work of Christ, seeing that work as the absorbing of a certain amount of the retributive justice of God onto his person. The difference might seem minor when stated in this narrow sense, but the ramifications for other aspects of systematic theology are immense. In the process, I will find much reason to challenge Vanderhorst's assertion that 'Lewis was not particularly interested in systematic theology.' And I am quite certain that it is not Lewis who needs a deeper acquaintance with Paul's epistles.

Lewis' similarity to Irenaeus and Athanasius can be seen in many other aspects of his systematic theology. Lewis' explanation of the Trinity *and its significance for defining God's nature as pure goodness and personal love* is founded on Athanasius's convictions of God's goodness and his defense of the doctrine of the Trinity and the Nicene Creed.⁶ Lewis argues that humanity's fall was not necessary, unlike John Calvin who saw it as *necessary*,⁷ and this view Lewis shares with Irenaeus and Athanasius.⁸ Lewis, like all the patristic writers, insisted that God gave human beings free will; God could not and would not create automatons.⁹ Lewis sees human evil as the wrong ordering of priorities, of taking secondary goods and elevating them to first place, of depriving one's self of the goodness of God by turning into one's self in utter self-contradiction of how we were intended to live turned to God, this he found in Athanasius.¹⁰ Lewis views the Incarnation as the supreme miracle, like Athanasius; in fact, Lewis wrote a forward to a new translation of Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*, in which he expressed deep personal appreciation for Athanasius as well as admiration for his mastery of classical Greek, which Lewis read firsthand.¹¹ Lewis sees the Son of God's assumption of human flesh as initiating God's salvation of human nature, which was completed by the ascension when Jesus raised his own humanity personally to the right hand of the Father; that view of the Incarnation was held universally by the patristic and Nicene theologians, who said that God had to assume the totality of a human nature in Christ to heal it totally. That I will explore below. Like the early theologians, Lewis saw the Christian life as participation: participation in Christ, in 'the Christ-life' in us.¹² Finally, Lewis understood

⁴ Stephen Freeman, *Therapeutic Substitutionary Atonement* (blog, April 19, 2013); <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/glory2godforallthings/2013/04/19/therapeutic-substitutionary-atonement/> last accessed April 13, 2015

⁵ T.F. Torrance, *Atonement* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009). Dr. Gary Deddo has suggested that I use 'real exchange' to indicate this atonement theory.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, 'Evil and God', *God in the Dock; Mere Christianity*, book 3, chapter 1; book 4, chapters 1 and 2; Athanasius, *Against the Heathen*, chapters 6 – 7.

⁷ 'Nor ought it to seem absurd when I say, that God not only foresaw the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his posterity; but also at his own pleasure arranged it.' (John Calvin, *Institutes*, book 3, ch.23, section 7) 'Nothing is more absurd than to think anything at all is done but by the ordination of God...Every action and motion of every creature is so governed by the hidden counsel of God, that nothing can come to pass, but what was ordained by Him...The wills of men are so governed by the will of God, that they are carried on straight to the mark which He has fore-ordained' (John Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 1, ch.16, section 3). In ch.17, section 5, Calvin admits that logic implies God is therefore responsible for human sins, but he dismisses the accusation without a real basis. Calvinist theologian Mark R. Talbot writes, 'God does not merely passively permit such things by standing by and not stopping them. Rather, he actively wills them by ordaining them and then bringing them about, yet without himself thereby becoming the author of sin.' (John Piper and Justin Taylor, editors, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL: 2006, p.35, footnote 7)

⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.11.2; 4.14.1; Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 2 – 4

⁹ 'For there is no coercion with God, but a good will [towards us] is present with Him continually. And therefore does He give good counsel to all. And in man, as well as in angels, He has placed the power of choice (for angels are rational beings), so that those who had yielded obedience might justly possess what is good, given indeed by God, but preserved by themselves.' (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.37.1) 'But because man is possessed of free will from the beginning, and God is possessed of free will, in whose likeness man was created, advice is always given to him to keep fast the good, which thing is done by means of obedience to God.' (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.37.4; cf. 4.39.1 – 4)

¹⁰ Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 2 – 6; C.S. Lewis, 'First and Second Things', *God in the Dock*.

¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*; 'The Grand Miracle', *God in the Dock; Introduction to Athanasius' On the Incarnation*.

¹² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, book 2, chapter 5.

hell as not merely the wrath of God, which it is, but, most fundamentally, as the love of God, as Irenaeus said in a preliminary way¹³ and as Athanasius' friend and ally from Cappadocia, Gregory of Nyssa, stated.¹⁴

Irenaeus and the Ontological Substitution Atonement Theory

Who were Irenaeus and Athanasius, and what did they say about Jesus' atonement? Irenaeus (130 – 200 AD), was bishop of Lyon in Roman Gaul, now modern France. He was the earliest writing theologian outside of the New Testament. He wrote a well researched critique of Gnosticism and a defense of Christian faith. Gnostic thought flowed out of the Greek philosophical dualism which opposed the world of intangible spirit against the world of physical matter. Gnostics believed that human beings were more fundamentally soul than body. In their ensuing belief system, they held various views of the body as inferior or irrelevant: the body would not be redeemed by God, therefore a person's body was ethically unimportant and/or its desires must be suppressed completely. This dualism stood in contradistinction from the Hebraic-Christian view which said that God in creation made physical things good, even the human body.

The Gnostics wanted to deny the supremacy of the God of the Old Testament for His creation of matter; they posited another God higher than the Old Testament God. They denied the relation between the Old Testament and the New for its continuity along these lines. They denied the Incarnation of Jesus into truly a human nature because of their disdain for the human body. And they also denied the bodily resurrection of Jesus, which completed the incorporation of humanity's physical nature into the very being of God.

Irenaeus understood that the entirety of biblical revelation, salvation, and the trustworthiness of God was at stake. Irenaeus knew that because of God's original commitment to the physical world, God has acted in Christ to redeem not only the souls of people but also their bodies, and furthermore the creation story itself. Jesus' incarnation and bodily resurrection is God's affirmation of His commitment to physical matter in general, human bodies in particular, and the creation story as a whole. After he demonstrates from Scripture that the Word of God himself took human flesh in Jesus,¹⁵ Irenaeus says that Jesus saves human nature in himself by destroying the sin in himself.

Therefore, as I have already said, He caused man (human nature) to cleave to and to become, one with God. For unless man had overcome the enemy of man, the enemy would not have been legitimately vanquished... But the law coming, which was given by Moses, and testifying of sin that it is a sinner, did truly take away his (death's) kingdom, showing that he was no king, but a robber; and it revealed him as a murderer. It laid, however, a weighty burden upon *man, who had sin in himself*, showing that he was liable to death. For as the law was spiritual, it merely made sin to stand out in relief, but did not destroy it. For sin had no dominion over the spirit, but over man. For it behooved *Him who was to destroy sin*, and redeem man under the power of death, that *He should Himself be made that very same thing which he was, that is, man*; who had been drawn by sin into bondage, but was held by death, so that *sin should be destroyed by man*, and man should go forth from death. For as by the disobedience of the one man who was originally moulded from virgin soil, the many were made sinners, and forfeited life; so was it necessary that, by the obedience of one man, who was originally born from a virgin, many should be justified and receive salvation. Thus, then, was the Word of God made man, as also Moses says: 'God, true are His works.' But if, not having been made flesh, He did appear as if flesh, His work was not a true one. But what He did appear, that He also was: God recapitulated *in Himself* the ancient formation of man, that *He might kill sin*, deprive death of its power, and vivify man; and therefore His works are true.¹⁶

This is a very significant passage in Irenaeus. In it, he insists that Jesus came to resolve a problem within human nature itself, and offer back to us his renewed humanity. Irenaeus says this in three ways. First, he says here and elsewhere that Jesus took his humanity not from some other substance, like the virgin soil from which Adam was

¹³ 'For one and the same God [that blesses others] inflicts blindness upon those who do not believe, but who set Him at naught; just as the sun, which is a creature of His, [acts with regard] to those who, by reason of any weakness of the eyes cannot behold his light; but to those who believe in Him and follow Him, He grants a fuller and greater illumination of mind.' (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.29.1; cf. 4.39.1 – 4, although he does not elaborate more on this in 4.40.1 – 3, instead expanding on the parable of the wheat and the tares and its motif of 'fire').

¹⁴ Michael Himes, S.J., *Doing the Truth in Love*, p.14 – 15 quotes from Gregory of Nyssa.

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.16

¹⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.18.7, emphasis mine; see also 2.12.4; 3.18.1; 5.1.3

first taken, but from the virgin womb of Mary.¹⁷ The Word of God did this to partake of the same human nature that we all share, to renew it and save it. He did not start a different type of human being, because that would have been of no help to us! This is why Irenaeus constantly referred to Jesus' person and work as the 'recapitulation' – or the summing up, or literally, the re-heading up – of all humanity. Taking this concept from Paul (Eph.1:10), Irenaeus says that Jesus is the 'second Adam' (Rom.5:12 – 21; 1 Cor.15:21 – 22; 45 – 49) the one from whom a new life passes into all other human beings.

Second, here and elsewhere, Irenaeus refers to the 'ancient formation of man.' Irenaeus saw humanity as patterned after the Word-Son of God from the creation. That is, as the Son of God has always been the true image of God through whom the Father is made known (Col.1:15, Heb.1:3), human beings were formed in the image of the eternal Son of God to similarly make God known in the creation (Gen.1:26 – 27). That relation that human beings were intended to have with God external to God but by the Spirit, the Son of God originally and eternally has with the Father within the Godhead by the Spirit. This is why the Son of God inhabited human flesh, to remake the likeness of God in a human person.

'But who else is superior to, and more eminent than, that man who was formed after the likeness of God, except the Son of God, after whose image man was created? And for this reason He did in these last days exhibit the similitude; [for] the Son of God was made man, assuming the *ancient production* [of His hands] into His own nature.'¹⁸

'...man, a created and organized being, is rendered after the image and likeness of the uncreated God, the Father planning everything well and giving His commands, the Son carrying these into execution and performing the work of creating, and the Spirit nourishing and increasing [what is made], but man making progress day by day, and ascending towards the perfect, that is, approximating to the uncreated One. For the Uncreated is perfect, that is, God.'¹⁹

Irenaeus' theology of atonement is therefore rooted in the goodness of God's physical creation of humanity, the creation story itself with humanity's original mandate to increase in stature and maturity, and behind that, an inner-Trinitarian relationship between the Father and the Son in the Spirit. This last point led Karl Barth to say that the Son of God not only became the 'second Adam' in the human man Jesus of Nazareth; he was also the 'first Adam,' the pattern by which God made man, the Image of God behind the image of God. But because we have tarnished the image of God within ourselves, and damaged the *relation* between ourselves and God, Jesus came to restore it. So he exhibited the 'similitude,' that is, the similarity with us: 'the Son of God was made man, assuming the ancient production [of His hands] into His own nature.' Now, the 'ancient' pattern in which God created human beings is affirmed by the Son of God who served as the template for that pattern in the first place. Jesus has restamped human nature with the image of God again, and reconciled human nature to God into the correct relation which God originally intended.

Third, and most importantly, Irenaeus saw Jesus as having cleansed his own humanity of sin. Irenaeus understood human sin as being a physical corruption within human nature, a defacing of the image and likeness of God in physical form,²⁰ and a breaking in the relationship between God and man internalized into human flesh and reproduced by the human mind. That is why, for Irenaeus, Jesus needed to physically save and redeem his own humanity first. As the Gospels demonstrate, Jesus put the flesh to death through his moment-by-moment choices to always align himself with the love of the Father, never giving into temptation. And as Paul said, God personally

¹⁷ 'Why, then, did not God again take dust, but wrought so that the formation should be made of Mary? It was that there might not be another formation called into being, nor any other which should [require to] be saved, but that the very same formation should be summed up [in Christ as had existed in Adam], the analogy having been preserved.' (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.21.10; cf. 3.22.1 – 2)

¹⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.33.4

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.38.3

²⁰ Irenaeus held that the physical corruption in humanity is synonymous with sin in us: 'Wherefore also He drove him out of Paradise, and removed him far from the tree of life, not because He envied him the tree of life, as some venture to assert, but because He pitied him, [and did not desire] that he should continue a sinner for ever, nor that the sin which surrounded him should be immortal, and evil interminable and irremediable. But He set a bound to his [state of] sin, by interposing death, and thus causing sin to cease, putting an end to it by the dissolution of the flesh, which should take place in the earth, so that man, ceasing at length to live to sin, and dying to it, might begin to live to God.' (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.23.6)

condemned, in this way, sin in the flesh of Jesus (Rom.8:3). On the cross, Jesus put to death the old self, the body of sin (Rom.6:6), to raise his body into newness of life. This constitutes salvation of human nature for Irenaeus, even if it only happened in one particular individual, Jesus. For Jesus has become the source of that salvation (Heb.5:9) for the Spirit takes what is his – namely his renewed God-cleansed, God-soaked humanity – and discloses it to us (Jn.16:14).²¹ For Jesus represents all other Israelites and all other human beings, and did this on our behalf, that he might share his Spirit with all who believe and trust in him. In the physical body of Jesus, human nature is in principle brought into full union with God by virtue of Jesus overcoming all sin and temptation in his personal choices. We become ‘partakers’ of the Spirit, the ‘earnest of incorruption.’²² This is why Irenaeus stressed that ‘man, who had sin in himself, showing that he was liable to death’ needed Jesus to cleanse and remove that sin from human nature. Thus, the corruption of human nature required the eternal Son of God ‘himself [to] be made that very same thing which he was, that is, man; who had been drawn by sin into bondage.’ When God took human flesh to himself, He ‘recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man’ in the physical body of Jesus. This, Irenaeus says, constitutes humanity’s ‘salvation’ which many should receive and be justified by participating in Christ by his Spirit. ‘Salvation’ is not merely the turning aside of the wrath of God, as Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones thought of it, but the purging of the sinful corruption within us by the wrath of God, that God’s life and power might be joined to the whole human person in the love of God.²³

This is the ontological substitution atonement theory. It is a subset of the Christus Victor category, because it understands Christ as victorious over the internal enemy we face: sin indwelling us. Whereas other aspects of the Christus Victor theory tend to emphasize the devil, or death, or some enemy external to us, the ontological substitution atonement theory highlights the internal contradiction within our ontological and relational being: we are corrupted (ontology) and alienated and hostile (relational) to God. Those who mischaracterize the patristic atonement theology as merely Jesus paying a ‘ransom’ to the devil are grossly misunderstanding the mind of the early church, and misunderstanding the mechanism by which ‘the flesh’ (as Paul and John used that term in a technical sense to refer to the corruption in our nature) served as the point of influence by which the devil had access to us. The patristic and Nicene theologians were working in ontological and relational categories, and ontological substitution was clearly their atonement theory. Already in Irenaeus we see a fine exposition of it, and this emphasis continued for centuries.

Athanasius and the Ontological Substitution Atonement Theory

I will briefly examine one more leading voice in the early church and then turn back to consider C.S. Lewis. Athanasius (296 – 373 AD) was bishop of Alexandria, Egypt during the tumultuous years of the Arian heresy. He was a leading opponent of the Arian heresy; he was the main architect of the Nicene Creed; and he gave us the final form of the New Testament as consisting of the twenty-seven books we now recognize. Lewis was very well acquainted with Athanasius and admired him.²⁴ In grossly oversimplified terms, whereas Irenaeus argued to preserve the full humanity of Jesus Christ, Athanasius argued to preserve his full deity. But interestingly enough, Athanasius reproduces Irenaeus’ ontological substitution atonement theory, even though he was approaching it from the opposite direction, because Christ had to be both fully divine and fully human so that God could unite Himself with humanity in the person of Jesus and overcome the onto-relational problem of corruption and alienation within human nature. Athanasius writes:

‘Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under the power of the corruption proper to

²¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.20.3; 3.24.1; 5.6.1 – 2; 5.8.1 – 4

²² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.24.1

²³ Irenaeus later says, for example, that Jesus *saved* the physical material of human flesh and blood (*Against Heresies* 5.14.1 – 4). This theme runs throughout Irenaeus and demonstrates that he understood salvation as not merely a forensic forgiveness but an ontological union with the life of God through the person of Jesus and by the Spirit.

²⁴ In his introduction to Athanasius’ *On the Incarnation*, Lewis writes with deep appreciation, ‘This is a good translation of a very great book...He stood for the Trinitarian doctrine, ‘whole and undefiled,’ when it looked as if all the civilised world was slipping back from Christianity into the religion of Arius – into one of those ‘sensible’ synthetic religions which are so strongly recommended today and which, then as now, included among their devotees many highly cultivated clergymen. It is his glory that he did not move with the times... When I first opened his *De Incarnatione* I soon discovered by a very simple test that I was reading a masterpiece. I knew very little Christian Greek except that of the New Testament and I had expected difficulties. To my astonishment I found it almost as easy as Xenophon; and only a master mind could, in the fourth century, have written so deeply on such a subject with such classical simplicity. Every page I read confirmed this impression.’

their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. What – or rather Who – was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing?... Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father... This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.²⁵

This passage is very significant because Athanasius does two things. First, Athanasius asks us to imagine Adam and Eve making a small mistake or committing a small offense against God, each other, or their future children – a raised voice, an inappropriate gesture, an unthankful or wasteful attitude, a fearful self-defense, etc. And he says that if they had done this, ‘repentance would have been well enough,’ because God would have easily forgiven them that. In a day and age where Anselm’s satisfaction theory and Calvin’s penal substitution theory have so colored our view of God that we view any small offense against God as calling forth infinite, unlimited anger from Him, it is startling to find Athanasius casually dismissing it as beneath God. Many have simply not known what to do about this statement other than say that Athanasius must have been wrong.²⁶ For so great a theologian to say this deserves careful attention which is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.

Second, Athanasius says that the deep tragedy of the fall lies in the ‘subsequent corruption’ of humanity, not in God’s offended honor or justice. In Athanasius’ usage, ‘corruption’ means more than simply our mortality and eventual death. In his previous chapter, Athanasius also refers to moral and relational corruption as well.²⁷ It is an ontological and relational category for him, reflecting the ontological change and relational opposition to God that humanity acquired from Adam and Eve internalizing rebellion into their very selves, their spiritual *and* physical beings. Here, Athanasius is more precise than Lewis’ chapter ‘The Perfect Penitent’, as I will show later.

The divine dilemma in the penal substitution theory postulates a conflict between God’s attributes (love and wrath). But in Athanasius, and in the ontological substitution theory, the divine dilemma was not internal to *God*, but external to Him and internal to *humanity*. Athanasius says that it was ‘monstrous and unfitting’ for human beings to degenerate spiritually, morally, and physically like this.

‘It was unworthy of the goodness of God that creatures made by Him should be brought to nothing through the deceit wrought upon man by the devil; and it was supremely unfitting that the work of God in mankind should disappear, either through their own negligence or through the deceit of evil spirits... It was impossible, therefore, that God should leave man to be carried off by corruption, because it would be unfitting and unworthy of Himself.’²⁸

Whereas some aggressive exponents of the penal substitution theory say, perhaps out of sincere theological conviction, and perhaps for dramatic effect to play up God’s act of mercy in Jesus, that God could have let the whole humanity-creation project go to ruin and ultimately to hell (since they also conceive of hell as an eternal prison system), Athanasius would have found that view repulsive. It denigrates God’s love for humanity and goodness to

²⁵ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 2:8 – 9

²⁶ E.g. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.163.

²⁷ ‘When this happened, men began to die, and corruption ran riot among them and held sway over them to an even more than natural degree, because it was the penalty of which God had forewarned them for transgressing the commandment. Indeed, they had in their sinning surpassed all limits; for, having invented wickedness in the beginning and so involved themselves in death and corruption, they had gone on gradually from bad to worse, not stopping at any one kind of evil, but continually, as with insatiable appetite, devising new kinds of sins. Adulteries and thefts were everywhere, murder and rapine filled the earth, law was disregarded in corruption and injustice, all kinds of iniquities were perpetrated by all, both singly and in common. Cities were warring with cities, nations were rising against nations, and the whole earth was rent with factions and battles, while each strove to outdo the other in wickedness. Even crimes contrary to nature were not unknown, but as the martyr-apostle of Christ says: ‘Their women changed the natural use into that which is against nature; and the men also, leaving the natural use of the woman, flamed out in lust towards each other, perpetrating shameless acts with their own sex, and receiving in their own persons the due recompense of their pervertedness.’ (Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 1.5)

²⁸ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 2.6

say that God could have sat back and done nothing to save humanity in our fallen state. In Athanasius' mind, God *had* to come in Jesus to bring us the salvation of human nature; He had no choice.

Penal substitution theory also postulates that the object of God's love and the object of God's wrath are identical: our personhood. This is because the primary cultural context for Protestants to draw up a model of God is the Latin judicial system of merit and penance, in which punishment must fall on a *person* for his disobedience to the law. I will highlight the significance of this misunderstanding below. The critical distinction Athanasius makes is that the object of God's love is our personhood and the object of God's wrath is the corruption in our nature. God's love and God's wrath *do not have the same object*. That is why the corruption in Jesus' own body needed to be got rid of through his death as the very expression of God's love for us. God's wrath served God's love by purging away in Christ all that opposed intimate relationship with God.

'The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father's Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection. It was by surrendering to death the body which He had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from every stain, that He forthwith abolished death for His human brethren by the offering of the equivalent. For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled in death all that was required. Naturally also, through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection. For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all. You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so is it with the King of all; He has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against mankind have been foiled and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be. For the human race would have perished utterly had not the Lord and Savior of all the Son of God, come among us to put an end to death.'²⁹

Like Irenaeus (and Paul) before him, Athanasius says that God's resolution to this problem was first to have the Word-Son of God take on human flesh, resist the corruption inherent in human nature since the fall, and overcome it through death and resurrection. Athanasius affirms along with Irenaeus that Jesus lived a sinless life as 'an offering and sacrifice free from every stain,' even though he had taken on the same sin-ridden humanity we all have. The Word-Son of God 'assumed a body capable of death' in order to live and die and rise again. Athanasius viewed the resurrection as an essential part of God's act of salvation, because it was a salvation of human nature by ridding it of its sinful corruption and antagonism.

'The supreme object of His coming was to bring about the resurrection of the body. This was to be the monument to His victory over death, the assurance to all that He had Himself conquered corruption and that their own bodies also would eventually be incorrupt; and it was in token of that and as a pledge of the future resurrection that He kept His body incorrupt.'³⁰

God would then, by virtue of Jesus' resurrection, resurrect all human beings from the dead, whether they bow the knee to Jesus or not. But in the meantime, God would work by His Spirit in people who receive Jesus' offer to begin cleansing and healing them of sin's corruption.

Athanasius' explanation of the atonement, like Irenaeus', might be called 'total substitution' as T.F. Torrance understands it, but not penal substitution.³¹ Unquestionably, the Son of God substituted himself totally in his

²⁹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 2.9

³⁰ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 4.22

³¹ T.F. Torrance, *Atonement* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.72 says, 'The New Testament speaks of the penal-substitutionary *aspect* of the atonement, *not* in the detached forensic categories that have developed in the Latin west, Roman or Protestant, but in terms of the intimacy of the Father-Son relation, in which the Son submits himself to the Father's judgement

incarnation, life, death, and resurrection as ‘a sufficient exchange’ for all human beings, solving the problem internal to humanity: our self-inflicted corruption to sin and death. The exchange was not simply penal, and not simply at the cross. Jesus’ ultimate solution to sin was not to remove the consequences of sin (with a certain conception of the wrath of God) but to deal with the source. Jesus offers his renewed, resurrected humanity which has been perfectly realigned with the Father in the Spirit – an ontological and relational solution physically embodied in him. But Athanasius clearly did not think in penal terms.

Nor does Athanasius see the atonement as a ‘satisfaction’ of one or more attributes of God. God in His wrath continues to oppose human sin and pierce with laser sharp focus the corruption within people by His Spirit, so God’s wrath was not ‘satisfied’ in a broad sense pertaining to all humanity or the elect. God’s wrath continued to fall on Christians when He took their lives: Ananias and Sapphira for their lie (Acts 5:1 – 11) and the Corinthian Christians for eating communion with an unworthy attitude (1 Cor.11:29 – 30). Though perhaps this was not God’s wrath to ultimate condemnation, it was undeniably God’s wrath nevertheless. Neither was God’s love ‘satisfied’ because there still remained the work of the Spirit to apply the work of Christ to people through their faith, and the sanctification process for believers. If Athanasius ever thought of the atonement satisfying one or more attributes of God, he might say that God was only fully satisfied with Jesus *as a person*, for only Jesus has been perfected in glory. God’s satisfaction is not categorical, but personal, pertaining to each person. And God’s satisfaction in those who come to Christ will only fully come at the eschatological turning of the ages when God will finally abolish sin in our bodies altogether and we will share in Jesus’ resurrection glory. I may be imputing more theological weight behind his words, but I suspect that George MacDonald was commenting on satisfaction atonement theory when he said, ‘God is easy to please, but not easy to satisfy.’³²

Lewis’ Theology of Atonement: Ontological Substitution?

All this is important background for understanding Lewis. While I think the death and resurrection of Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is worthwhile to read and enjoyable to analyze, I will temporarily set it aside in favor of Lewis’ other writings, and return to it at the end of this paper. This is because I am quite sure that Lewis knew that the atonement for humanity had to be done from within the human person of Jesus. Since Aslan was a lion and not human, pre-existent in physical form and not incarnated into human flesh, the illustration is slightly obscured for theological purposes and needs more explanation.

Lewis alludes to the *effects* of Jesus’ atonement in many places. He says that sin is cancelled not by time but by repentance and the blood of Christ.³³ He refers to Jesus as ‘the Bleeding Charity’³⁴ which is radically generous and therefore radically excludes pride and self-protective vanity. At the end of the second book in the Space Trilogy, the king of Perelandra washes Ransom’s injured foot, sees his blood, and says, ‘So this is hru [blood]... And this is the substance wherewith Maleldil [God] remade the worlds’³⁵ In *Reflections on the Psalms*, Lewis said, ‘We are all in the same boat. We must all pin our hopes on the mercy of God and the work of Christ, not on our own goodness.’³⁶ In *Studies in Words* Lewis referred to “‘we humans in our natural condition,’ i.e., unless or until touched by [God’s] grace’ or ‘untransformed...human nature.’”³⁷ Thus, ‘Like an accepted lover, he feels that he has done nothing, and never could have done anything to deserve such astonishing happiness. All the initiative has been on God’s side, all has been free, unbounded grace. His own puny and ridiculous efforts would be as helpless to retain the joy as they would have been to achieve it in the first place. Bliss is not for sale, cannot be earned, ‘Works’ have no ‘merit,’ though of course faith, inevitably, even unconsciously, flows out into works of love at once. He is not saved because he does works of love; he does works of love because he is saved. It is faith alone that has saved him; faith

and is answered through the Father’s good pleasure – see here the supreme importance of John McLeod Campbell and his great book *The Nature of the Atonement*, in which he rightly warned us against thinking of atonement in *purely penal terms*, for we cannot think of Christ being punished by the Father in our place and the New Testament *nowhere* uses the word *kolazo*, punish, of the relation between the Father and the Son.’ (emphasis mine)

³² George MacDonald, quoted by C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p.158

³³ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p.61

³⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, p.35

³⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra*, p.220

³⁶ C.S. Lewis, ‘Judgment in the Psalms’, *Reflections on the Psalms*, in *The Inspirational Writings of C.S. Lewis*, p.139

³⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, cited by James Townsend, *C.S. Lewis’ Theology: Somewhere Between Ransom and Reepicheep*; <http://www.faithalone.org/journal/2000i/townsend2000e.htm>

bestowed by sheer gift.’³⁸ By themselves, however, these short statements do not describe the nature of the atonement, or ‘how it works.’

To describe Jesus, Lewis uses Irenaeus’ (and Paul’s) term *recapitulation*: Lewis says that human fetuses recapitulate animal forms in the womb, connecting humanity to nature itself, and Jesus to both, as the new head of both humanity and creation.³⁹ In the same article, Lewis also uses the diver analogy, which, impressively, moves from incarnation all the way to ascension again. Jesus is like a diver who strips off his clothes, dives into the water, swims through the warm green water and into the cold black water, reaches the precious object in the muck and slime, and with lungs bursting, reaches the surface and air again. ‘God has dived down into the depths of the universe and brought it back up, pulling it up, with him.’ This, along with many other indications in Lewis’ writings, clues us into the fact that Lewis was familiar with Irenaeus.

Lewis gave his clearest statement about his understanding of the atonement itself in *Mere Christianity*, especially in his chapter called ‘The Perfect Penitent.’ Vanderhorst considers letters that Lewis wrote after both *Mere Christianity* and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, in which Lewis comments on the atonement, which I will also consider. It is to Lewis’ great credit and humility that he distinguished between receiving Christ to save us from our sins, and trusting in a particular atonement theory about how Christ’s death accomplished it, just as eating is more important than having a theory of vitamins. And that must be repeated here. Nevertheless, Lewis does think that one cannot operate without a theory, and some theories, he believes, are better than others.

In *Mere Christianity*, the first theory Lewis considers is penal substitution: God wanted to punish those who rebelled with the Devil, and Jesus intercepted that punishment, so God let us off. Lewis says that this strikes him as ‘a very silly theory.’⁴⁰ He asks how punishing an innocent person instead of a guilty one makes sense. Proponents of penal substitution will argue, no doubt, that it allows God to retain His justice and wrath in connection with His love and mercy. But does penal substitution accomplish what it purports to? Does this arrangement actually preserve God’s justice? Is this the correct presumption by which to define God’s justice? Unfortunately, Lewis does not provide any further direct insight into his personal objections logically or biblically.

The second theory Lewis considers is the debt theory. We owed God a debt, and yet could not pay it. But Jesus, having the assets necessary, paid our debt. Vanderhorst calls this a *fiscal substitution* theory. But not all debts are discretely fiscal; one can owe God honor, for example, as Anselm said. And it is clear, besides, that Lewis was using fiscal language as a metaphor for something deeper. He also says that ‘fallen man is not an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms’ (p.59). We need to surrender, to repent. Yet, for Lewis, therein lies the problem.

‘Only a bad person needs to repent: only a good person can repent perfectly. The worse you are the more you need it and the less you can do it. The only person who could do it perfectly would be a perfect person – and he would not need it.’⁴¹

God cannot do it by Himself because nothing in His nature makes it necessary or possible. But God can help us by acting from within human nature, as a human being.

‘But supposing God became a man – suppose our human nature which can suffer and die was amalgamated with God’s nature in one person – then that person could help us. He could surrender His will, and suffer and die, because He was man; and He could do it perfectly because He was God. You and I can go through this process only if God does it in us; but God can do it only if He becomes man. Our attempts at this dying will succeed only if we men share in God’s dying... but we cannot share in God’s dying unless God dies; and He cannot die except by being a man. That is the sense in which He pays our debt and suffers for us what He Himself need not suffer at all.’⁴²

³⁸ C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*

³⁹ C.S. Lewis, ‘The Grand Miracle,’ *God in the Dock*, p.82

⁴⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p.59

⁴¹ Ibid, p.59

⁴² Ibid, p.60

I find Lewis' language here very close, but not identical, to Irenaeus' and Athanasius'. First, like theirs, Lewis' understanding is participatory. Lewis insists that Jesus does something for us that we could not do for ourselves. This is clearly found in Irenaeus and Athanasius. Hence, Lewis' view of the atonement is a substitutionary one at its root. Jesus serves as our substitute; it is this fact about substitution that undergirds our ability to participate in his death on our behalf.

Second, Lewis does speak of our 'human nature' needing to 'suffer and die.' He speaks of 'death' as the debt we had to pay. Like Athanasius, then, Lewis argues that Jesus' body was for Him not a limitation, but an instrument for dying.⁴³ However, what I do not understand in Lewis' chapter on the atonement is his lack of equal emphasis on Jesus' resurrection. For Irenaeus and Athanasius, the resurrection factors in equally with the crucifixion of Jesus. For if the problem that God needed to resolve was the corruption in human nature, then the resurrected body of Jesus is the culmination point of addressing that problem. For the patristic and Nicene theologians, the atonement was necessarily balanced between Jesus' incarnation, life, death, and resurrection in one great movement where the work of Christ is, in fact, the person of Christ himself moving through these stages of his life and vocation. However, for Lewis in this particular section, the stress subtly shifts from the physical and ontological category to the volitional. He focuses on *our will* and our repentance more so than our nature. The 'debt' we owe God – 'to surrender, to suffer, to submit, and to die' – Christ pays, true enough. But what about the truly human beings God wants us to become? Where is the counterpoint in Lewis' chapter on the atonement about the positive things God calls us to be and do in an ongoing sense: to reflect God's image, to be healed, to love, and to live renewed? These things, too, Jesus has accomplished for us, and shares with us.

Why exactly did Lewis believe that our repentance must be 'perfect'? Does something within *God* demand our perfect repentance? Is this the same as a perfect apology? Or perfect moral behavior? If so, then Lewis is close to a satisfaction theory. As in Anselm's theory, is God like a feudal lord with an offended honor? So Jesus 'pays' to God the satisfaction due His honor by a human being, and perhaps, as Anselm continued, Jesus stores up a 'treasury of merit' from which the rest of us can benefit by faith. In support of this, Vanderhorst cites a letter Lewis wrote after publishing *Mere Christianity* where he seems to soften his tone toward Anselmic theory: 'I shouldn't have written as I did if I had thought that there was a consensus of theologians in favor of the Anselmic theory. I believed that it was not to be found either in the New Testament or most of the Fathers. If I'm wrong in this, it is a plain matter of historical ignorance.'⁴⁴ But this does not seem to me to be an apology or a concrete change in his mind. Rather, Lewis almost certainly recognized, because of his reference to 'most of the Fathers,' that this is an atonement theory where Jesus' death is said to accomplish something outside his person; it is extrinsic to Jesus, since it focuses on some external transaction happening between Jesus and the Father (to satisfy some attribute of the Father other than 'love') and not intrinsic to Jesus' own person and the two natures within him. It is foreign to 'most of the Fathers.' As such, I doubt that Lewis would really endorse it.

I suspect that in Lewis' case, Jesus provides God with the satisfaction of human surrender, to completely lay down our arms against Him. If such is this case, then our repentance must be perfect because something within *us* requires it, in addition to something within *God*, who is self-giving love, and calls for all his human creatures to bear His image in our particular way. I suspect Lewis meant it in this latter way. As evidence, his later chapter in *Mere Christianity* called 'Obstinate Toy Soldiers' demonstrates that understanding. Lewis asks us to imagine a bunch of tin soldiers. Let us say that you want them to become human. But they resist. Lewis sees this as an analogy to God's situation. So God became human to make people like Himself. But the analogy breaks down because one tin soldier is not connected to the rest in any meaningful way. However, human beings are connected. There was a time when we were connected to our mother, and in a different way, our father. Hence, God sees us and relates to us not as a bunch of separate dots, but as a connected and complex tree. So when God came in Christ, He affected people before and after him. The effect spread throughout humanity. So humanity is saved in principle, but we need to appropriate that salvation. Lewis writes, 'One of our race has this new life: if we get close to Him we shall catch it from Him.'⁴⁵ Vanderhorst does not pay enough attention to the motif of the rebel laying down his arms, which Athanasius believed was not just a matter of the human *will*, but a deeper problem of human *nature*, by which the will was influenced though not determined. Jesus is the Son of God who entered into the human substance

⁴³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 3.17

⁴⁴ Ariel James Vanderhorst, 'Mere Atonement: C.S. Lewis & the Multiple Angles of Redemption', *Touchstone Magazine*, April 2009, volume 22, issue 3; <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=22-03-027-#ixzz11A5a5imf>

⁴⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p.157

which had internalized rebellion into itself, who forced that substance to turn back to the Father. In that sense, our repentance needed to be ‘perfect.’ It could not be a negotiation which brought the human being short of complete and full surrender. Nothing but total surrender could do to reorient the stubborn substance of human nature back to God. If this is the case, and I believe that it is, then Lewis’ atonement theory can be said to be fully ontological and relational.

I also suspect that Lewis left this matter intentionally ambiguous. I wonder if his commitment to write *Mere Christianity* as an apologist to advance what all three Christian traditions have in common drew him to this volitional language of repentance, because it is less controversial. It seems to me that people within various camps of atonement theories could actually read their definition of ‘repentance’ into Lewis’ chapter and come away thinking that Lewis is closer to them than to other theories. A Protestant or Catholic standing in the penal substitution–satisfaction camp could read Lewis as saying that people ‘owed’ God the surrender of their *will* and the death of their *self-will* for the sake of their past sinful actions and the way they had conducted their lives. Like a debtor owes a creditor, people owed this service to God because they are *creaturely*. Fiscal substitution is not that far off from penal substitution, wherein criminals owe both the injured party and the judge (God plays both roles) personal pain and prison time because they are *lawbreakers*. But fiscal substitution might actually go further than penal substitution because it describes the ongoing Creator-creature relationship as the state to which people must return, as opposed to penal substitution which, in isolation from other theological ideas, amounts to mollifying an angry God and getting out of jail free; further teaching concerning the Holy Spirit and ‘union with Christ’ must then be added to penal substitution to describe the relationship God wants with us on an ongoing basis.

Simultaneously, however, an Eastern Orthodox Christian standing in the ontological substitution camp could read Lewis as saying that people needed to repent by suffering the surrender of their rebellious *nature* in order to experience *theosis*, deification, in union with Christ. Hence Orthodox bishop Kallistos Ware could call Lewis an ‘anonymous Orthodox.’⁴⁶ Although elsewhere Lewis identifies ‘human nature’ as the problem, in *Mere Christianity*, Lewis’ lack of treatment of Jesus’ resurrection and its significance leads to this ambiguity, or possibility, depending on how one looks at it. Vanderhorst, for example, calls Lewis’ view of the atonement ‘eclectic.’ But Vanderhorst, significantly, does not try to position the larger theological thought patterns of Lewis against the patristics or the Eastern Orthodox.

How Ontological Substitution Fits in Lewis’ Broader Systematic Theology

To explore Lewis’ theology one step further, I will explore the place of his atonement theology in connection with other aspects of his theology. Like a jigsaw puzzle, various pieces of Christian theology must be fitted together in a way that makes sense with one another. The atonement is a piece that must fit with other theological pieces. And the atonement tends to be a locus for how all the other pieces intersect with each other. I will examine two aspects of theology that are connected with the atonement: the doctrine of hell and the doctrine of limited atonement. I will contrast the logical construction of those doctrines in connection with both the penal substitution and the ontological substitution atonement theories.

In the penal substitution atonement theory, hell is analogous to a prison system, in which God holds people against their will, because they want to get out. This is because the wrath of God is thought of as directed at our personhood for our infractions against God’s law. Jesus is thought of as the one who absorbs a certain amount of God’s wrath for those who accept him, leaving none of God’s wrath left over for them. By extension, God must have wrath for human beings who do not accept Christ, and His wrath will be infinite, leading to the damned experiencing God’s wrath eternally in hell (assuming that one’s doctrine of hell involves its eternity). This is why hell is necessarily analogous to a prison system in the penal substitution theory. Various questions arise from this position related to the character of God: Why does God keep people in hell against their will when they supposedly want to be with Him? Does the answer of ‘God must exact an infinite justice against human sin’ suffice? When combined with the doctrine of limited atonement, which I argue below is necessarily connected to penal substitution, does this imply that God was unwilling to atone for their sins to begin with? Does God have two aspects to His character – one side loving and one side wrathful? Does this not make God fundamentally arbitrary?

⁴⁶ Chris Jensen, ‘Shine as the Sun: C.S. Lewis and the Doctrine of Deification’, *Road to Emmaus*, Vol. 8, no. 2 (#29), 2005, quoting from Kallistos Ware, ‘God of the Fathers: C.S. Lewis and Eastern Orthodoxy’, *The Pilgrim’s Guide: C.S. Lewis and the Art of Witness*,

By contrast, in the ontological substitution theory, hell is not a prison system. It is, instead, a state of being in which the transformative love of God is received as torment. For those who receive Jesus, we experience God's love as love, because we are agreeing with his demand that the sinful corruption in our nature be put to death, to be fully healed. This is because the wrath of God is aimed at the corruption of sin in us, but the love of God is for our personhood. The 'fire' of hell can be understood from the biblical context as a refining fire,⁴⁷ where God is continuing to call for the destruction of the corruption in their nature, which they mistakenly take as an insult to their identity. Those who reject Jesus are therefore rejecting their very own existence and destiny. Through their own choices, they have conditioned their nature to curve in upon itself with self-love, having taken even that gift from God and turned it inwards. Yet God does not give up on them in and through Jesus. He keeps calling out to them in love. But because they experience God as a hated and jealous stalker who is constantly calling out to them, they experience God's love as sheer torment. They can only experience His love with utter loathing and bitterness. In this case, hell is the wrath of God, yes, but on a more profound level, hell is the love of God.

Which view of hell does Lewis subscribe to? Unquestionably, Lewis defines hell as the love of God, as in the ontological substitution atonement theory. In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis says that there is an aspect of hell that is retributive. It is 'a flag planted in rebel soil...In a sense, it is better for the creature itself, even if it never becomes good that it should know itself a failure, a mistake.'⁴⁸ But the person in hell refuses to acknowledge his guilt, and 'a man who accepts no guilt can accept no forgiveness'⁴⁹ but only be insulted by the feeling that he is being wrongfully accused. However, Lewis is clear that hell is not a sentence imposed on him but a mere fact of being what he is, or has become. 'Our imaginary egoist has tried to turn everything he meets into a province or appendage of the self...He has his wish – to live wholly in the self and to make the best of what he finds there.'⁵⁰ In *The Great Divorce*, Lewis presents a lengthy and majestic explanation of how hell might be this way. In this portrayal, person after person in hell refuses to accept the reorientation of their desires, despite the fact that they are confronted with the deeply problematic consequences of their choices to love something other than God in the first place. Hell is therefore full of self-contradiction. The problem is that by the time people are in hell, they have conditioned themselves to reject the transforming love of Jesus, because Jesus calls for too much transformation from them. 'Hell is a state of mind...And every state of mind, left to itself, every shutting up of the creature within the dungeon of its own mind – is, in the end, Hell. But Heaven is not a state of mind. Heaven is reality itself. All that is fully real is Heavenly. For all that can be shaken will be shaken and only the unshakable remains.'⁵¹ Hell is sulking, the spoiled child who would rather miss its play and its supper than say it was sorry and be friends; Hell is self-inflicted pain, like revenge, injured merit, self-respect, tragic greatness, and proper pride. The sensualist comes to Hell by craving a sensation even though the pleasure becomes less and less; 'he prefers to joy the mere fondling of unappeasable lust and would not have it taken from him. He'd fight to the death to keep it. He'd like well to be able to scratch; but even where he can scratch no more he'd rather itch than scratch.'⁵² In *The Last Battle*, Lewis shows how the dwarves are offered Aslan's food and friendship, but taste only ashes and hear only growlings. But Emeth, who was not a Narnian and thought he worshiped Tash, the god of the Calormen, was led to Aslan by his desires for true goodness and honor. Emeth was not saved by his works, but by his *desires*. Theologically, the desires in each person are given by God to each person by virtue of being made in His image. They are God's way of continuing to reach out to people. In all these portrayals of hell, Lewis insists that God does not have two different aspects to His character: one side of love and the other of wrath. Rather, Lewis says that God has only one continuous character: transforming and unifying love. In this, he follows an insight from Irenaeus and later developed by Gregory of Nyssa that the sun has one nature and sheds light no matter what; whether one's eye is healthy or sick determines how you experience it.⁵³ This is one more data point that indicates that Lewis aligns with the ontological substitution theory, not penal substitution. Notably, penal substitution advocates have difficulty with Lewis' portrayal of hell for exactly this reason.

⁴⁷ Fire is symbolic in Scripture of God's judgment, and especially of His refining judgment (Dt.4:24; 5:24 – 25; Ps.21:9; 29:7; 50:3; Isa.29:6; 30:27 and 30; Neh.9:12; Heb 12:29). Fire is used to separate impure metals from precious metals. 'Lake of fire' might be literally a large burning valley, or simply a region that is under God's refining judgment, because God continues to insist that people allow Him to refine away the corruption in their very nature. But they refuse to let Him.

⁴⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p.122

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.122

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.123

⁵¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, p.68

⁵² Ibid, p.70

⁵³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.29.1; cf. Michael Himes, S.J., *Doing the Truth in Love*, p.14 – 15 quoting Gregory of Nyssa

The second question to consider is whether the atonement is limited or unlimited. In penal substitution, the atonement is most often thought to be limited to the elect. One reason for this is to avoid a double accounting problem: If Jesus took all of God's wrath at the cross, and then God poured out more wrath on the unrepentant in hell, would this not be a double accounting problem concerning God's wrath? Another reason is to assert that Christ's death was efficacious for procuring the salvation of some, lest Jesus be said to have died for no one in particular and theoretically none. Hence, advocates of limited atonement tend to prefer to call their conviction definite atonement. The atonement must be definite in order for it to be effective, although this assertion rests on assumptions about God's wrath being directed at our personhood, about God's power being prior to His love, and about various Scriptural texts which seem to speak of the atonement being unlimited not being such in actuality. J.I. Packer, in his famous introduction to John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, argues that penal substitution necessarily means limited atonement:

'[John] Owen shows with great cogency that the three classes of texts alleged to prove that Christ died for persons who will not be saved (those saying that he died for 'the world,' for 'all,' and those thought to envisage the perishing of those for whom he died), cannot on sound principles of exegesis be held to teach any such thing; and, further, that the theological inferences by which universal redemption is supposed to be established are really quite fallacious...So far from magnifying the love and grace of God, this claim dishonors both it and him, for it reduces God's love to an impotent wish and turns the whole economy of 'saving' grace, so-called ('saving' is really a misnomer on this view), into a monumental divine failure. Also, so far from magnifying the merit and worth of Christ's death, it cheapens it, for it makes Christ die in vain. Lastly, so far from affording faith additional encouragement, it destroys the scriptural ground of assurance altogether, for it denies that the knowledge that Christ died for me (or did or does anything else for me) is a sufficient ground for inferring my eternal salvation; my salvation, on this view, depends not on what Christ did for me, but on what I subsequently do for myself... You cannot have it both ways: an atonement of universal extent is a depreciated atonement.'⁵⁴

I agree with Packer's view that limited atonement is necessarily related to penal substitution. In the ontological substitution atonement theory, however, the atonement is understood to be unlimited, but not in a way that at all implies universal salvation. That is because the conceptions of God's love, God's wrath, salvation, and the basis for assurance are quite different. God's love is defined as undergirding human free will, and Lewis repeatedly affirmed human free will as the only logical way to maintain God's goodness in the face of human disobedience. God's wrath is directed at the 'sin' (Irenaeus) or 'corruption' (Athanasius) in each person. God's wrath is still aimed at the 'ungodliness and unrighteousness of people' (Rom.1:18), but not at the people themselves, and not at the 'elect' and 'unelect' as categories. It is not the case that person A deserved a discrete amount of God's wrath, and person B deserved a discrete amount of God's wrath, and so on, and that Jesus took a discrete amount of God's wrath which aggregated the amount due to persons A and C, but not B. Salvation for humanity is understood as the redemption of human nature in the physical body of Jesus Christ, brought into union with God. Hence, if no one ever came to faith in Jesus, God would still have been faithful to humanity in His love for us, by restoring humanity in principle in Christ to what humanity was always supposed to be: His image bearer. And the basis for assurance is not the scope of the atonement, but rather one's own fruit-bearing participation in the Spirit; the apostolic writers never base their encouragement about assurance on the former, but the latter (Jn.14:8 – 21; Rom.8:12 – 17; 2 Pet.1:1 – 8; etc.)

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis studiously avoids the question of the scope of the atonement. However, in *The Great Divorce*, Lewis says of anyone who finds the bus going from hell to heaven: 'Everyone who wishes it does...No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.'⁵⁵ In fact, the whole book labors to illustrate that point. Lewis' admiration for George MacDonald, whose rejection of limited atonement was famous and controversial, is also significant in this regard. Lewis said of MacDonald, in his introduction to *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, 'I have never concealed the fact that I regarded him as my master; indeed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him. But it has not seemed to me that those who have received my books kindly take even now sufficient notice of the affiliation. Honesty drives me to emphasize it.' For Lewis, the problem of who limits human salvation is firmly answered as humanity, not God. God does not limit the scope of the atonement; it is available to every person, genuinely,

⁵⁴ J.I. Packer, 'An Introduction to John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*', reprinted in Packer and Dever, *In My Place Condemned He Stood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p.126.

⁵⁵ C.S Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, p.72

without reservation on God's side. Because for God to limit the availability of the atonement of Christ in any way will call into question God's very own goodness and His authenticity when He says that He wants none to perish but all to be saved (Ezk.18:32 – 33; 2 Pet.3:9). People damage their own ability to choose God by their stubborn and entrenched resistance to God. But this does not mean that the door is locked from God's side. For Lewis, hell is not God's prison system where He keeps people in against their will. As Lewis said, 'The gates of hell are locked from the inside.'

In this regard, I think we can be fairly certain that Lewis follows Irenaeus and Athanasius in his insistence on human free will as undergirded by God's love, God's wrath as directed at each person's corrupted nature, salvation as the recovery of human nature in principle in Christ, and the openness of the atonement. The pieces fit beautifully together. They correspond so well with Eastern Orthodox Christian theology that Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, as I mentioned above, called C.S. Lewis, 'an anonymous Orthodox.' Therefore, when I read Ariel Vanderhorst's assertion that 'Lewis was not particularly interested in systematic theology,' I cannot bring myself to agree. Far from it: Lewis cared intensely about systematic theology, and did theology quite well.

In fact, now would be the appropriate time to question penal substitution advocates who plunder C.S. Lewis for his view of hell when their own view of hell as God's prison system is unattractive, ineffective, or shown to have inconsistency problems. When Dr. Tim Keller, pastor of New York's Redeemer Presbyterian Church, and popular defender of penal substitution, is said to have been asked about Lewis' view of hell in *The Great Divorce*, he reportedly replied, 'It works.'⁵⁶ Whether this anecdote is true or not of Tim Keller, I know that it is true enough of many other evangelicals, who hold to penal substitution, yet hand out copies of C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*. The good humored Lewis would probably chuckle. Yet one thing is certain: Vanderhorst's accusation of Lewis would apply to this category of evangelical Christians: *they are 'not particularly interested in systematic theology.'*

Despite an ambiguity in *Mere Christianity* related to the atonement, I believe we are on firm ground in positioning Lewis very close to Irenaeus and Athanasius, if not identically, in his atonement theology. He was clearly very familiar with the patristic and Nicene fathers. Two of the theological puzzle pieces nearest to the atonement piece – the doctrine of hell and the doctrine of limited or unlimited atonement – indicate that Lewis believed in the ontological substitution atonement theory, for he thought through the issues in the same way. He was openly appreciative of George MacDonald, who himself was very much in agreement with the Greek church fathers. And Lewis shares the larger emphases of the patristic and Eastern Orthodox Christians: the Trinity and its importance; the significance of the Father eternally begetting the Son; union with Christ and participation in Christ's sonship, theosis or divinization as the goal of human existence.

The Death and Resurrection of Aslan

Lastly, perhaps for my own pleasure, and hopefully for that of my readers, I want to return to *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and other books in *The Chronicles of Narnia* to consider how Aslan's death and resurrection illustrates Lewis' theology of the atonement. As I mentioned above, there will be limitations with this portrayal because Aslan was not human, and was always in physical form. So Aslan simply cannot be understood as one who takes human flesh through a human mother's womb, cleansing that human nature as he progressively unites it to his divine nature. The ontological substitution theory will necessarily be obscured on that particular point. Nevertheless, Aslan says that those who know him in Narnia must know him better on Earth. So, one thinks, there must surely be ways that there are echoes and allusions to the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

While Aslan is not portrayed as human, he *is* portrayed as a creature. And since the lion is called 'the king of beasts' both in the western world and, I believe, in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, though I cannot find the reference, clearly Aslan is portrayed as a kingly figure, as was Adam in the creation. Thus, Aslan inhabits the world of Narnia as its rightful king, the physical image or manifestation of the Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. He is the true Adam of Narnia, the one who sets actual humans, like Frank and Helen in *The Magician's Nephew*, Peter, Susan, Edmund,

⁵⁶ Dr. Keller has been criticized by fellow Reformed pastors Iain Campbell and William Schweitzer, editors, *Engaging with Keller: Thinking Through the Theology of an Influential Evangelical* (Colorado Springs, CO: Evangelical Press, 2013) for preaching a relational, not legal, view of sin and a self-imposed, rather than God-imposed, hell. This suggests Keller's sympathies with Lewis, and the backlash from more conservative Reformed circles. See: <http://adaughterofthereformation.wordpress.com/2013/07/24/engaging-with-keller-thinking-through-the-theology-of-an-influential-evangelical/>; last accessed August 11, 2013

and Lucy in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and Caspian in *Prince Caspian*, on their rightful thrones as kings and queens under him, as his regents.

Lewis also develops his ideas about the fall in *The Chronicles of Narnia* more than in any of his other works, and this is significant to understanding Lewis' atonement theology. For what the fall undid, the atonement makes right again. Near the end of *The Magician's Nephew*, Aslan commands the boy Digory to take a fruit from the beautiful tree of life high up on a mountain to plant a younger version of that tree down in the land of Narnia, to be its protection from the White Witch Jadis. The relationship between the fruit, those who take it, the desires with which they take it, and the results, is quite fascinating and complex. This episode fills out what Lewis' real thoughts might have been about the biblical trees of life and knowledge, which he leaves to one side in *The Problem of Pain*⁵⁷ and sadly does not address in *Mere Christianity*. The one tree in *The Chronicles of Narnia* seems to consolidate the nature of the two trees in the biblical Eden. The tree's fruit gives everlasting life to the Witch, who becomes 'like a goddess.' But at the same time, the tree's fruit also gives a kind of knowledge of good and evil, because the nature of the fruit is such that it seems to amplify exponentially the motivations of the one who plucks it and eats it. So for Digory, who plucks the fruit for the sake of obeying Aslan and protecting Narnia, the tree's fruit functions as the seed of another tree which does protect Narnia from the Witch Jadis. The Witch, however, by eating the fruit for the sake of acquiring more power, seems to become even more paranoid about her power, tormented by the possibility of defeat, and this is what seems to make Digory's Narnian seedling a thing she fears and hates. Lewis is definitely working with primary and secondary desires again; when we invert first and second things in importance, thus committing idolatry by relegating God to be a means to our own ends, we come to fear and despise the righting of those upside down priorities. In this case, the Witch Jadis eats the fruit of the one tree and acquires everlasting life but in her sinful state. Aslan says, 'But length of days with an evil heart is only length of misery and already she begins to know it. All get what they want; they do not always like it.'⁵⁸

Who or what does the White Witch represent? Satan and the fallen angels? Adam and Eve and fallen humanity? I believe she represents both. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Beaver says that the Witch is not human, but Jinn, being the offspring of Adam and Lilith.⁵⁹ In *The Magician's Nephew*, she is the last of her race, a magic-wielding race of superhuman beings from a world called Charn. So it seems possible she represents the angels. But it is also possible she represents humanity as well. Just as Aslan is non-human but represents humanity in its truest sense, the White Witch is non-human but represents humanity in its most defective sense. The nature of this corruption in the White Witch is ontological and relational. Eating from the tree further corrupts her being ontologically and increases her relational resistance to Aslan.

This begs the question of what the biblical tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil *meant*, a subject that Lewis treats in fragments. I will attempt to reconstruct it. According to Genesis 3:22 – 24, the tree of life would have made people live forever in whatever state they were in. Hence, after humanity's fall, the tree of life would have sealed humanity in their dying, corrupted state. This is why God expels human beings from the garden. He was not denying humanity something good. Rather, He wanted to protect them from something bad. That Lewis would have possessed this understanding is suggested by his acquaintance with Irenaeus, who said of this:

'Wherefore also He drove him out of Paradise, and removed him far from the tree of life, not because He envied him the tree of life, as some venture to assert, but because He pitied him, [and did not desire] that he should continue a sinner for ever, nor that the sin which surrounded him should be immortal, and evil interminable and irremediable. But He set a bound to his [state of] sin, by interposing death, and thus causing sin to cease, putting an end to it by the dissolution of the flesh, which should take place in the earth, so that man, ceasing at length to live to sin, and dying to it, might begin to live to God.'⁶⁰

The tree of life must have been God's way of inviting human beings to live with God eternally, to be drawn into the life of God. It seems to have been the eternal life from within God Himself, offered sacramentally as part of the creation. God wanted us to be co-creators with Him of our own nature. Through this tree of life, He would have

⁵⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, chapter 5

⁵⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*, p.190

⁵⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, p.77

⁶⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.23.6

preserved in our humanity the choices we make in relation to Him. This seems to be where Lewis derived one function of the single tree of life in the high mountains above Narnia.

What, then, was the tree of knowledge of good and evil? It was a physical boundary meant to actually teach humanity about good and evil. It was neither a trick nor a temptation. Of course, the tree taught humanity about boundaries. Adam and Eve would later bear children, per God's intention. They would need to respect each other's boundaries: spouse to spouse, parents to children, sibling to sibling; humanity and the created world. In order to do that, they needed to properly listen to God because He would be the one to help them know how to treat each other. God's fundamental boundary is that they would not try to define good and evil for themselves. So long as human beings respected God as the king of His creation, human life would flourish, and healthy human community was truly possible. By not eating from the tree of knowledge, they would have grown in the knowledge of good and evil. They would have understood, the more time passed, that God is good. How? If Adam and Eve had had their first child in the paradise, they would start to understand by contrast what it might mean to lose their child. If they had continued to grow in love and relational experience with each other, they would start to understand by contrast what it might mean to have walked through life alone.

Here I am relying on Lewis' *Perelandra*. In that story, Lewis describes a world and a race which did not fall into this fundamental temptation. This is what the Adam figure says there:

'We have learned of evil, though not as the Evil One wished us to learn. We have learned better than that, and know it more, for it is waking that understands sleep and not sleep that understands waking. There is an ignorance of evil that comes from being young: there is a darker ignorance that comes from doing it, as men by sleeping lose the knowledge of sleep. You are more ignorant of evil [on Earth] now than in the days before your Lord and Lady began to do it. But [God] has brought us out of the one ignorance, and we have not entered the other.'⁶¹

Because of this quote from *Perelandra*, I am confident that Lewis would say that Adam and Eve did not need to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to develop real knowledge of good and evil.

Lewis would tell us that the only way to understand evil is actually to resist it, reject it, and pursue growth in the goodness of God's will and God's company. That is because when we do evil, we rationalize it, blame someone else, and/or get used to it, and therefore we simultaneously lose insight into what evil really is and how terrible its consequences are. That's why I concur with Lewis that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil really did provide knowledge of good and evil. It wasn't a trick or test. If Adam and Eve had continued to reject the evil (trying to be their own gods), and grown in the goodness of God's plan (being centered on Him and drawing life and love from Him), they would have understood evil very well, not by actually doing evil, but by rejecting it utterly. Perhaps Lewis would add the following to connect these truths to our lived experience: When you do something kind and loving for another person, or do a community service activity, and you feel that whisper of satisfaction and meaning, you feel more energy and motivation to continue. You want your career and life to somehow be more and more tied to that purpose. Then, when you look backward, you can see by contrast that you didn't have as much purpose, meaning, and enjoyment of goodness as you did earlier. Now, you understand evil, the meaninglessness of self-centeredness. Not by participating in it, and not by doing it, but by going in the other direction: into the goodness God designed.

How were Adam and Eve to know that life was good, and God was good? Because life would have just kept getting better and better for them, as long as they resisted the evil, which was not hard, and grew in the goodness God had designed for them. Adam and Eve would have had more and more beauty, variety of fruit, wonder at the creation, creativity, relationship, sex, love, children, more love, more relationship, more sex, and on and on. One does not need to do evil in order to know and enjoy God's goodness. Yet they would have also understood evil. How? By resisting it. They would have understood that God's boundaries were good for them, and brought them life. Not just the one boundary of not eating from the tree of knowledge, but all boundaries, although the fruit of the tree of knowledge symbolized all other proper God-given boundaries and summed them up in itself. By not eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge, they would understand that they must not internalize boundary breaking. When Adam and Eve did eat from this tree, they not only broke a boundary; instead, they became boundary breakers. Their

⁶¹ C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra*, p.209

human nature became fundamentally corrupted and a relational resistance to God became part of humanity's corrupted genetic inheritance. However, this interpretation seems to be more subtle than most others, and I wonder if Lewis did not feel like he could stand on any broad consensus on the fall, either in *Mere Christianity*, or in *The Problem of Pain*.

From the New Testament and the subsequent Nicene formulations, we get more insight into God's design of humanity in creation. As the Triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit love one another freely. Yet it is their very divine nature to love one another, and they would never violate their own divine nature. For perfect freedom is the ability to choose according to one's nature, without obstruction. What, then, is the nature and freedom of human beings? If human beings were to be like the Triune God, and bear His image, we would have to both love God and one another, and do so freely. So God originally made our human nature good ('it was very good' in Gen.1:31) and inclined towards Him in love. We had a choice to freely love God, without obstructions. And God, precisely because He respects human free will out of His love for us, wanted to give us the choice to fuse our free will to our good nature permanently, so that we would never sin, i.e. so that we would voluntarily choose to always love God eternally and bind ourselves to Him. This is why God was wooing us to Himself even in the goodness of the creation. This was the nature of the tree of life. Does this mean that human beings could have just obeyed God in love, eaten from the tree of life, and been joined to God forever? Yes. It could have been that simple. In fact, Adam and Eve should have hung Satan the serpent on the tree of knowledge, suggested when Moses hung a serpent on a pole in Numbers 21:4 – 7). What is hung on trees is meant to be remembered. This tempter and his temptation should have been remembered forever in his defeat. Notice, however, that the tree of knowledge was not there because of Satan. Satan merely corrupted its proper use. It was important to humanity's development into the fullness of the image and likeness of God and it would have been there regardless.

Yet, the White Witch falls into sin by eating. Many generations later, she also corrupts Edmund, a human boy, by tempting him to eat. This is surely significant as an echo of the biblical story of Eve telling Adam to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Again the analogy from Narnia to the biblical story is imperfect. The Witch seems to play the role of Satan and Eve, of superhuman and human. Edmund is only one boy as opposed to a human couple; we see sin worked out in his life but not in the legacy he leaves; we read of only a few of his days in Narnia as opposed to the story of his many descendants. Nevertheless, I believe Lewis intends for us to consider that Edmund's nature is corrupted. Lewis shows us this by Edmund's ongoing and illegitimate craving for the Witch's candy, Turkish Delight. Edmund turns down the nourishing dinner at the Beavers in favor of the Witch's fare, yet thinks constantly of Turkish Delight even when he does eat with the Witch: 'He had eaten his share of the dinner, but he hadn't really enjoyed it because he was thinking all the time about Turkish Delight – and there's nothing that spoils the taste of good ordinary food half so much as the memory of bad magic food...He did want Turkish Delight...' ⁶² Lewis' high regard for communion, as well as his understanding of sin as addictive, makes any reference to Edmund's food cravings rather significant. His craving represents his corruption. While Peter, Susan, and Lucy are given hot tea, cream, and sugar by Father Christmas, ⁶³ Edmund continues to be tormented by hunger while in service to the Witch, pulling her sled: 'Please, Your Majesty, could I have some Turkish Delight?' ⁶⁴ He is given bread and water instead. Then, further on, 'Edmund hoped she would say something about breakfast' ⁶⁵ and eventually becomes 'too tired to notice how hungry and thirsty he was.' ⁶⁶ The Witch had promised something which she now withholds from him. In this regard, the Witch represents Satan, whose deceit turns to mockery as he withholds the very thing he promised, because it was not truly his to offer human beings.

Into this terrible situation, Aslan provides the solution, the atonement involving his personal death and resurrection. The ongoing physical presence of Aslan in Narnia prevents any kind of incarnation. Nevertheless, Aslan represents Edmund as a fellow creature and as Edmund's true Adamic lord. Aslan goes to his death, complete with the Christ-like detail of his female followers observing his death and resurrection more closely than any of his male followers. The Witch muzzles him, shaves him, and kills him on the Stone Table. When he rises again, Susan and Lucy ask him what it all means.

⁶² C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, p.84 – 85

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.105

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.107

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.111

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.130

‘It means,’ said Aslan, ‘that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge only goes back to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.’⁶⁷

Vanderhorst records an objection to this posed in *The Narnian*: ‘Really, what sort of explanation is that? Why should things be this way? How does the death of the ‘willing victim’ take the traitor from the clutches of the Witch? And how can the magic that frees the traitor be older than the magic that condemns him?’ Unfortunately, Susan and Lucy do not ask Aslan more questions, or express puzzlement about his explanation. What, then, does this mean?

The Deep Magic seems to be part of the fabric of Narnia, and is written on the Stone Table. I suggest that the Deep Magic is the creation order, which is part of the fabric of the world, which was inscribed in some sense on the stone tablets of the Sinaitic Law. As we well know, the creation order from Genesis included the warning that death would result from Adam and Eve rejecting God, trying to be their own gods, and casting Him out of the creation. Putting the source of life at a remove from themselves and the creation, they brought about death to themselves and to all activities that involved the bringing forth of more life: namely, human childbearing and tending plants and living things. This was the Magic by which the Witch thought she could reign as a legitimate Queen in Narnia, by drawing Narnian creatures into her service by trickery or force and then threatening them with death by turning them to stone. Similarly, Satan believed he could reign over humanity in creation by disrupting Adam and Eve’s loyalty to God, and then wielding death itself, which God used to prevent corrupted human beings from being eternally corrupted, as a fear and tool to further turn people against Him and against each other. But because God is good, this could not continue.

I contend that the ‘magic deeper still which she did not know’ represents the love within the Triune relations of the Godhead. It existed ‘before Time dawned,’ in the ‘stillness and darkness’ when God alone existed. There was, is, and always will be an unbreakable love shared by the Father and the Son within the Spirit. And the love this God has for His creatures is patterned after the unbreakable bond of love within Himself. As Irenaeus said, ‘man... was formed after the likeness of God... the Son of God, after whose image man was created... And for this reason He did in these last days exhibit the similitude; [for] the Son of God was made man, assuming the ancient production [of His hands] into His own nature.’⁶⁸ It is not that God made humanity’s fall into corruption a necessity in His plan. Rather, God was always prepared to redeem His beloved creatures if they fell into sin. God was committed to human beings because the bond of love between God and humanity was patterned after the bond of love between the Father and the Son, in the Spirit. That bond of love is the ‘magic deeper still.’ It lies rooted in the very character of God, defined in thoroughly Trinitarian terms.

This is why, in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the Witch ‘should have known’ that Aslan’s self-sacrifice would bring about a new order of things. Aslan’s father, the Emperor-Over-the-Sea, would never abandon his beloved son to death. Death would start to work backwards as we indeed see when Aslan is able to breathe on the statues of creatures that had defected from the Emperor-Over-the-Sea to the Witch’s camp, and return them to life. As I mentioned before, this is a Johannine image of Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit on people (Jn.20:22). I find it significant that Aslan could not do this until he died and was raised. He could not share his personal victory over death and the Witch’s reign until he had entered death at her hands and passed through it. Similarly, Satan ‘should have known’ that Jesus’ self-sacrifice would bring about a new order of things. Death started to work backwards as Jesus is now able, by his Spirit breathed out upon people (Rom.6:1 – 11; 1 Cor.15:45 – 49) to connect people with his own death and resurrection, to bring them out of the creation order’s ordinance of death to humanity and the Sinaitic Law’s condemnation of death upon Israel. Jesus did not overthrow those orders but rather entered them, lived under them, and fulfilled them to bring his people through them – by a connection with himself – to the other side. ‘The magic that frees the traitor is older than the magic that condemns him’ precisely because the love of God that was always prepared to personally pursue the sinner, free the sinner from sin, and draw the human being back to God, at great personal expense, is older than the creation order itself.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.159 – 160

⁶⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.33.4

But no treatment of Aslan's death and resurrection would be complete without examining what happens to Edmund. Lewis leaves us unsure of what Aslan and Edmund talked about in private conversation before Aslan's death. When next Aslan meets Edmund, having settled the Witch's claim on Edmund's life through his own death, it is after he has breathed new life into all the creatures that had been turned to stone by the Witch. Aslan will continue to give new life to those who have been wounded by the Witch. Edmund lies on the battlefield mortally wounded, having met the Witch in personal combat and broken her wand. Aslan tells Lucy to administer one drop of her healing cordial to his lips.⁶⁹ Edmund drinks the liquid, and this leads to Edmund's full recovery. I wonder if Edmund's drinking of the cordial is the reversal of his eating the Witch's Turkish Delight. Does the cordial symbolize a gift of the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit himself? It was given to Lucy by Father Christmas, who might represent the Spirit of Jesus, who gives us gifts from Jesus as part of his triumph (Eph.4:7 – 13; cf. Rom.12:6 – 8; 1 Cor.12 – 14; 1 Pet.4:10 – 11). Receiving Jesus involves internalizing him by his Spirit. Perhaps the Witch's power to entice and then wound are not analogous to a *sequence* in the life of a Christian, but two complementary and simultaneous images of the same reality. If Edmund's battlefield injury being healed by the cordial is a *parallel* to his enslavement to the Witch being broken by Aslan's death and resurrection,⁷⁰ then this would complete the participatory motif involved in the ontological substitution atonement theory. Edmund was not breathed upon by Aslan, but did take into himself a healing substance as a gift from Aslan.

Interestingly, for a time, Edmund does not actually know what Aslan did for him; Susan and Lucy believed that he still needed to be told.⁷¹ In a nod to his earlier conviction expressed in *Mere Christianity* about distinguishing between the atonement itself and theories about the atonement, Lewis narrates that Edmund benefited from Aslan's self-sacrifice without understanding what had been done for him. One can certainly benefit from Jesus' atonement on our behalf without understanding the theories about it. But perhaps, Lewis suggests, one should still be told about a theory at some point.

Summary

And what theory would Lewis commend? Having examined a great deal of Lewis' thoughts on the atonement, including the sources (represented by Irenaeus and Athanasius) which we know he valued, I suggest the following observation in summary. I mentioned earlier, as I considered Lewis' fantasy works, that he was more suggestive and developed in *Narnia* and *Perelandra* about the fall than he was anywhere else. I suspect that this had a repercussion on Lewis' ability to write as clearly as he could have on the atonement in *Mere Christianity* and perhaps elsewhere. If the human problem is not adequately defined, the solution may not be adequately defined either, and this, I suggest, may have been one contributing cause for Lewis to write about 'The Perfect Penitent' in *Mere Christianity* in slightly ambiguous and muted terms, without emphasizing the bodily resurrection of Christ as part of the atonement package. Was this the reason why Lewis did not press the distinction between human nature and human personhood in his theology of the atonement as stated in *Mere Christianity*? Only he would be able to answer that.

I find it notable, however, that just as the Nicene theologians pressed the distinction between divine nature and divine personhood in discussing the Triune God, the Eastern Orthodox tradition considers the subsequent distinction between human nature and human personhood to be theologically vital as well. This refinement and clarity continued through the great martyr-theologian of the Monothelite debates, Maximus the Confessor, and was preserved into the twentieth century by Russian Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky, who said, fascinatingly, that the Son of God saves human *nature* and the Spirit of God saves human *persons*.⁷² This distinction, which undergirds the ontological substitution atonement theory, could easily serve to qualify and revise the penal substitution atonement theory, which fails to make that critical distinction. Lewis clearly demonstrates elsewhere that he entertained thoughts about creation and fall, the possibility of human knowledge of good and evil apart from the fall, the corruption of human nature because of the fall, and so on. I do not know why he did not draw together

⁶⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, p.176

⁷⁰ Originally, I considered whether the cordial represented the wine of Christian communion, which itself symbolizes the physical blood of Christ that has God's life-giving power because it is the inner substance of the perfected and transfigured Jesus. However, my mentor, Dr. Gary Deddo, the professor who taught this class on Lewis and for whom I write this paper, disagreed with the connection I drew there. Admittedly, I am on much more uncertain ground on this particular point.

⁷¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, p.177

⁷² Vladimir Lossky quoted in Chris Jensen, 'Shine as the Sun: C.S. Lewis and the Doctrine of Deification', *Road to Emmaus*, Vol. 8, no. 2 (#29), 2005.

all his insights to state his doctrine of the atonement more succinctly and in a way that Jesus' resurrection balanced his death in significance. But to the extent that I have accurately thought Lewis' thoughts after him, I hope I am representing him well, and doing him the honor he deserves from one who appreciates his theological legacy very much, and admires his ability to make Christian theology enjoyable and practical.

My examination of Lewis also attests that the ontological substitution atonement theory can easily be integrated with the 'ransom' theory. Only when Jesus purges his own humanity of the corruption within it and is raised to new life without sin can he share with others his victory over death, the Law, and the devil. Together, the two atonement theories form two complementary parts of the overall Christus Victor paradigm. Christ is victor over the forces within humanity and the forces outside humanity. In Christ, and by the Spirit, God frees us from all the things that prevent us from bearing His image and enjoying communion with Him. But the two theories are not merely coequal halves. Rather, the ontological substitution theory serves to undergird the 'ransom' theory, for the former is the cause and the other is the effect. And of course, if Jesus lived and died in an exemplary way, not merely moralistically but also in his inward life in the Spirit, in his moment by moment relational dependence on the Father and the Father's leading (Jn.5:19), then ontological substitution can serve as the foundation for Jesus as the 'moral exemplar,' which proves to be not an atonement theory per se. After all, if the Mosaic Law could not save Israel or us, why would the terrifyingly higher standard of Jesus' self-sacrifice do so? The 'moral exemplar' theory is not so much an atonement theory as it is a beginning point for Christian ethics once we understand Christ's union with us and our union with him by his Spirit.

If the ontological substitution and ransom atonement theories, as well as the moral exemplar *emphasis* (not atonement theory) can be integrated in this way, what shall we do with penal substitution, which seems to be not easily integrated at all? The idea that God 'satisfies' His wrath through Jesus' death alone is particularly difficult to integrate with Scripture and with the patristic and Nicene theologians. To be precise, Lewis was not suspicious about 'substitution' theory, but 'satisfaction' theory. But I'm afraid whether he was correct, as I believe he was, must be the subject of another essay.