

Medical Substitutionary Atonement in Ignatius of Antioch

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Introduction: Who is the Heir of the Ancients?

‘When we ask what the precise nature of this vicarious activity of Christ was, we find Nicene theologians regularly falling back upon familiar biblical and liturgical terms like ransom, sacrifice, propitiation, expiation, reconciliation to describe it, but always with a deep sense of awe before the inexpressible mystery of atonement through the blood of Christ. They used these terms, however...to refer, to not any external transaction between God and mankind carried out by Christ, but to what took place *within the union of divine and human natures in the incarnate Son of God.*’¹

‘Atonement thus occurs for the Fathers through the dynamic of the incarnation itself, not by way of some extrinsic theory, i.e., satisfaction, penal substitution, and so on. Why, one wonders, did theology subsequently fail to reflect this? I am not sure. Part of the reason, I suspect, lies in how the incarnation came to be largely understood. With focus on the miracle of God becoming flesh in the birth of Jesus, the saving significance of the rest of Jesus’ life was overshadowed. With focus returned, so to speak, on the Cross, the climactic end of Jesus’ life, the impression *de facto* was that the real meaning of God’s identification lay at the beginning and at the end, not in the entire range of Jesus’ life.’²

Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, the authors of the recent book *Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution*, claim that penal substitutionary theory stretches back to the earliest fathers of the church.³ Of these early theologians, they impressively cite Justin Martyr (c.100 – 165), Eusebius of Caesarea (275 – 339), Hilary of Poitiers (c.300 – 368), Athanasius (c.297 – 373), Gregory ‘the Theologian’ of Nazianzus (c.330 – 390), Ambrose of Milan (339 – 397), John Chrysostom (c.350 – 407), Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430), Cyril of Alexandria (375 – 444), Gelasius of Cyzicus (fifth century), Gregory the Great (c.540 – 604). They then proceed to quote Thomas Aquinas (c.1225 – 1274), John Calvin (1509 – 64), and then others from the Reformed tradition. My focus here involves correcting their misunderstanding about the early theologians. They express some nervousness about whether penal substitution is historically attested in early church history, and their reason for hoping it can be vindicated:

‘The question of historical pedigree has acquired a further significance in recent years, for increasing numbers of people are suggesting penal substitution is a novel doctrine, invented around the time of the Reformation by a church that was (it is alleged) drifting ever further from the biblical faith of the early church Fathers. This is a serious challenge. To put the matter bluntly, we ought to be worried if what we believe to be a foundational biblical truth remained entirely undiscovered from the days of the apostles right up until the middle of the sixteenth century. At the very least, such a discovery would undermine the idea that penal substitution is clearly taught in the Bible. On the other hand, it would be immensely reassuring to find that our understanding of the Bible has indeed been the consensus of Christian orthodoxy for almost two millennia.’⁴

But scholarly opinion weighs against these authors. Most theologians and historians of the early church believe that the early church was united in upholding the broad Christus Victor theory for over a millennium. The varied language of Jesus as a healer, ransom, deliverer, and conqueror was used to denote Jesus being victorious over human sinfulness, death, and the devil.⁵ Substitution, but not penal substitution, was clearly taught, for Jesus was victorious on our behalf and for our salvation. I am calling this view ‘ontological substitution,’ or ‘medical

¹ T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 1983), p.168. I am indebted to this work, especially p.161 – 168, and Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (London: T&T Clark, 1993), for the citations in this section.

² Father Henry Charles, *The Eucharist as Sacrifice*, November 19, 2006; http://www.catholicnews-tt.net/v2005/series/euch_sacrifice191106.htm; Father Charles is a Roman Catholic parish priest in Trinidad and Tobago

³ Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p.14

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.162

⁵ Gustav Aulen, *Christus Victor* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998, originally published 1930), chs.1 – 5

substitution,’ although Eastern Orthodox theologian Stephen Freeman prefers ‘therapeutic substitution,’ and Reformed theologian T.F. Torrance calls it ‘total substitution.’ It was only Anselm of Canterbury who first articulated an atonement theory that positioned Jesus as a ‘satisfaction’ of ‘an attribute’ of God. In Anselm’s theory, Jesus satisfied God’s *honor*, which contributed to the idea that Jesus stored up a ‘treasury of merit’ others could access. Anselm could therefore leave the question of the scope of the atonement open, and genuinely open to human free will to choose Jesus. However, Anselm paved the way for John Calvin and others to position Jesus as satisfying God’s *retributive justice*, which became a broader category that was extended across people and across time, and which was understood in such a way that Jesus exhausted God’s wrath at one time, upholding God’s retributive justice on their behalf. Unlike Anselm’s theology where Jesus satisfied God’s honor in a personal way, giving others access, person by person, to his achievement, Calvin’s theology positioned Jesus against God’s justice in a categorical way, on behalf of the elect, all at once. This left no logical place for genuine human free will.

In this essay, I will shed light on why I believe these three authors misunderstand the theological thought of the earliest Christian theologians, especially those at the Council of Nicaea. They were not advocates of the penal substitutionary atonement theory. Instead, they held what I am calling ‘medical substitution,’ which is an aspect – and in my opinion, the *foundation* – of the *christus victor* understanding. This position is the view that Jesus had to physically assume fallen human nature, unite it to his divine nature, overcome temptation throughout his life in the power of the Holy Spirit, and defeat the corruption within his human nature at his death, in order to raise his human nature new, cleansed, and healed, so he could ascend to the Father as humanity’s representative and share the Spirit of his new humanity with all who believe. That rather long-winded sentence can be boiled down to the saying that was popular with Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, and others: ‘That which is not assumed is not healed.’ God must assume to Himself what He intends to heal. Hence if God intends to heal the entire human being, He must assume the entire human being in Christ. My comparison of the two theological doctrines and their significance can be found in separate essays. This particular essay focuses on the atonement theology of the early church fathers.

Ignatius of Antioch (c.35/50 – 108/117 AD)

Historical Context and Significance

Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach claim to be ‘fairly exhaustive up to and including Gregory the Great.’⁶ This assertion is deeply problematic, not only because they neglect very important figures in church history, but also because they do not demonstrate any historical understanding of the life of the early Christians. I will begin with a writer they ignore: Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius is one of the five so-called ‘apostolic fathers,’ those who lived and wrote within one generation of the apostles. Besides Ignatius, this group includes Clement of Rome, Polycarp of Smyrna, the *Didache*, and the *Shepherd* of Hermas. These latter four writings unfortunately do not provide us with enough material to discern their atonement theology.⁷ Though not apostles themselves, these writers occupy a position of importance historically and theologically. Ignatius has been thought to be either the immediate ‘successor’ (though the precise meaning of that term is debated) of Peter in Antioch, or the successor to Evodius who succeeded Peter. Tradition also suggests that Ignatius and his friend Polycarp, who became bishop of Smyrna, were both disciples of the apostle John. Antioch was the most important Roman city in the eastern part of the Empire. The city was very diverse, and because believers there were drawn from all walks of life and defied previous social categories, they were first called ‘Christians’ at Antioch (Acts 11:26).

Ignatius is also important as an explicit historical link between the apostles to the articulate bishop and theologian Irenaeus, one generation later. Ignatius quotes, though not by name, from: Matthew (and/or Mark, given material common to both), Luke, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians.⁸ This is not to say that he was unaware of the material from which he did not quote, but he gives us some indication of the spread of material that would be later consolidated formally as the New Testament; these communities were far from hermetically sealed from each other. In addition, sometime just before or not long after Ignatius’ martyrdom, which the Philippians had already heard about,⁹ Polycarp of Smyrna copied all of Ignatius’ letters and sent them to Philippi, demonstrating a pattern from apostolic times of Christian communities rapidly disseminating valuable information.¹⁰ This must have been prior to 120 AD. According to church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, Irenaeus was a hearer of Polycarp in Smyrna, and would have known the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, along with everything Polycarp and the Christian community in Smyrna knew.¹¹ So the continuity of teaching from the apostles to the apostolic fathers in the first century and to Justin Martyr and Irenaeus in the mid to late second century can be seen.

As bishop of Antioch who refused to bow to Emperor Trajan, Ignatius was charged with sedition and sentenced to die in the Roman Coliseum. His death can be dated to sometime within the reign of Trajan (98 AD to 117 AD), and most historians place the date in the range of 108 – 117 AD. On his long trip to Rome, marching alongside much younger Roman soldiers, he wrote seven letters just before his martyrdom in Rome (between 110 – 117 AD). Six were to various church communities and one was to Polycarp of Smyrna, his fellow bishop and possibly fellow pupil at the feet of the apostle John. These letters are mostly encouragements to them to not plead or intervene on his behalf, as his route would take him through or past these cities in the western part of Asia Minor. In these letters, Ignatius makes some theological reflects on the church, the sacraments, the role of bishops, and the Sabbath. Ignatius’ letters demonstrate a brevity and grammar consistent with a man hurriedly and almost breathlessly sending off letters.

⁶ Ibid, p.163

⁷ Clement of Rome, *Epistle to the Corinthians*, or *1 Clement*, compares Jesus’ blood on behalf of others to the penitent prayers of the Ninevites on their own behalf (ch.7), which is not primarily a penal substitution motif, and could be a medical-ontological substitution motif (vicarious repentance), but also a variant on moral exemplar. Clement also refers to the blood of Jesus as the instrument of redemption (ch.12), applies Isaiah 53 to Jesus (ch.16), and says, ‘On account of the Love he bore us, Jesus Christ our Lord gave His blood for us by the will of God; His flesh for our flesh, and His soul for our souls’ (ch.49). This could be a penal or medical substitution text, and there is not enough data to tell which Ignatius means. Polycarp of Smyrna’s *Epistle to the Philippians* contains only two references to atonement: Jesus is he ‘who for our sins suffered even unto death’ (ch.1); and ‘Let us then continually persevere in our hope, and the earnest of our righteousness, which is Jesus Christ, ‘who bore our sins in His own body on the tree,’ [1 Pet.2:24] ‘who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth,’ [1 Pet.2:22] but endured all things for us, that we might live in Him’ (ch.8). Neither quotation, nor their contexts, are determinative in relation to the distinction between penal or ontological substitution.

⁸ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); see Glenn Davis, *The Development of the Canon of the New Testament*, <http://www.ntcanon.org/Ignatius.shtml>.

⁹ Polycarp of Smyrna, *Epistle to the Philippians* 9; if Ignatius was brought through Philippi on his way to Rome, the Philippian church would have personally greeted him

¹⁰ Ibid, 13; cf. Mt.28:18 – 20; 1 Th.5:27; Col.4:16; Ephesians itself seems to have been a general letter meant for rapid circulation since in the oldest manuscripts, there is a blank addressee in 1:1

¹¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.5

Ignatius' Epistles

We must use some caution with the existing forms of Ignatius' letters. Shorter and longer versions exist. The original seven letter collection was also supplemented by spurious letters assigned to Ignatius' name. Some scholars have argued that the longer versions of the seven authentic letters were enlarged to make the content agreeable to theological concerns of this or that dispute. But other scholars maintain the genuineness of the longer versions of all seven letters.¹² It is quite possible that an early contemporary of Ignatius, such as Polycarp, was responsible for the longer versions.

Ignatius is understood as debating the heresy called Docetism, which denied to Jesus a truly human nature and especially truly human suffering.¹³ Ignatius responds by reasserting the suffering of Jesus as being truly human suffering.¹⁴ To the Smyrnaeans, he also recommends the study of the Hebrew prophets and the reading of the Gospel, 'in which the passion [of Christ] has been revealed to us, and the resurrection has been fully proved.'¹⁵ We note the pastoral concern to be rooted in the expectation in the Hebrew prophets that the Messiah would be truly human, and in the historical account of 'the Gospel' that Jesus was in fact truly human did truly suffer.

In that same section, Ignatius also reminds his audience of the eucharist. The martyr-bishop of Antioch is well-known for calling the bread 'the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father in His loving-kindness raised from the dead.' Ignatius connects the eucharist to the human suffering of Jesus for theological reasons which he provides in his letter to the Ephesians. There, he calls the eucharist 'the medicine of immortality, the antidote against death, but that we should live forever in Jesus Christ.'¹⁶ The longer version of this letter finishes the sentence instead, 'but a cleansing remedy driving away evil, that we should live forever in Jesus Christ.' What undergirded Ignatius' view of the eucharist? The humanity of Jesus, which Ignatius regarded as a 'cure.' This invites the inquiry of what exactly Ignatius believed about the humanity of Jesus.

To the Ephesians, Ignatius writes:

'But some most worthless persons are in the habit of carrying about the name [of Jesus Christ] in wicked guile, while yet they practise things unworthy of God, and hold opinions contrary to the doctrine of Christ, to their own destruction, and that of those who give credit to them, whom you must avoid as ye would wild beasts. For "the righteous man who avoids them is saved for ever; but the destruction of the ungodly is sudden, and a subject of rejoicing." [Proverbs 10:5; 11:3] For "they are dumb dogs, that cannot bark," [Isaiah 56:10] raving mad, and biting secretly, against whom ye must be on your guard, since they labour under an incurable disease. But our Physician is the only true God, the unbegotten and unapproachable, the Lord of all, the Father and Begetter of the only-begotten Son. We have also as a Physician the Lord our God, Jesus the Christ, the only-begotten Son and Word, before time began, but who afterwards became also man, of Mary the virgin. For "the Word was made flesh" [John 1:14]. Being incorporeal, He was in the body; being impassible, He was in a passible body; being immortal, He was in a mortal body; being life, He became subject to corruption, that He might free our souls from death and corruption, and heal them, and might restore them to health, when they were diseased with ungodliness and wicked lusts.'¹⁷

The shorter version of this section reads:

'For some are in the habit of carrying about the name [of Jesus Christ] in wicked guile, while yet they practise things unworthy of God, whom ye must flee as ye would wild beasts. For they are ravening dogs, who bite secretly, against whom ye must be on your guard, inasmuch as they are men who can scarcely be cured. There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; God existing in flesh; true life in death; both of Mary and of God; first passible and then impassible, even Jesus

¹² Philip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume I: The Apostolic Fathers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867), p.134 – 136

¹³ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology Volume I: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature: From the Apostles Creed to Irenaeus* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics Inc., 6th printing 1992), p.65

¹⁴ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Trallians* 10 – 11

¹⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 7

¹⁶ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 20

¹⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 7, longer version

Christ our Lord.’¹⁸

What interests me here is the identification of human sinfulness and error as a *disease* which needs to be *cured*. The legal-penal framework is not present. The longer version certainly piles up epithets about the men who take the name of Jesus in a manipulative way, deploying the phrase ‘incurable disease’ to describe their condition. But Ignatius, in both shorter and longer versions, immediately goes on to discuss Jesus in such a way to make clear that he believes Jesus is the cure for the ‘disease’ of sin. The longer version is quite remarkable for its theological content. It uses the title ‘Physician’ of both ‘God...the Father’ and ‘the Lord our God, Jesus the Christ.’ The union of his immortality and his mortal body resulted in life for humanity. He uses the phrase ‘became subject to corruption’ in both a physical sense and moral sense, and the evidence for that is twofold: (1) given the sinful errors of the blaspheming men above, their problem is not just that they are physically dying but also morally and spiritually corrupt; and (2) the subsequent phrases identify physical ‘death’ as distinct from ‘corruption,’ and ‘health’ as consisting of reversing ‘ungodliness and wicked lusts.’ Hence it seems fairly certain that Ignatius’ atonement theology can be described as ‘ontological substitution’ or ‘medical substitution.’

The shorter version of this letter sees the substance of Jesus as Physician to be the unique union of ‘flesh and spirit; both made and not made.’ While the shorter version is much more abbreviated than the longer version on this issue, the same thought is present. It is the union of Jesus’ immortality, or divine nature, and his mortal body, which is his human nature, which is itself the healing of the diseased human nature carried by all, especially the blasphemers. The high Christology of Ignatius is present in the shorter version as well: ‘God existing in flesh; true life in death.’

Similarly, in the letter(s) to the Trallians, Ignatius deploys medical and healing terminology for Jesus’ atonement once again.

‘Not that I know there is anything of this kind among you; but I put you on your guard, inasmuch as I love you greatly, and foresee the snares of the devil. Wherefore, clothing yourselves with meekness, be ye renewed in faith, that is the flesh of the Lord, and in love, that is the blood of Jesus Christ. Let no one of you cherish any grudge against his neighbour. Give no occasion to the Gentiles, lest by means of a few foolish men the whole multitude [of those that believe] in God be evil spoken of. For, ‘Woe to him by whose vanity my name is blasphemed among any’ [Isaiah 52:5].’¹⁹

Ignatius connects being ‘renewed in faith’ to ‘the flesh of the Lord.’ He connects being renewed ‘in love’ to ‘blood of Jesus Christ.’ If he is not referring to the actual eucharistic elements of bread and wine, encouraging his readers to hold fast to the observance itself and its proper ministers, then he is at least using the elements conceptually to denote our participation by the Spirit in Christ, specifically in his humanity. In the previous chapter, Ignatius expresses concern that they ‘continue in intimate union with Jesus Christ our Lord, and the bishop, and the enactments of the apostles’²⁰ as contrasted with ‘heresy.’²¹ So this participation-in-Christ element in Ignatius is apparent.

Ignatius’ further concern is Christian obedience, observable by ‘the Gentiles.’ For the Antiochian bishop, the truth about Christ leads directly to conduct. As the apostle Paul deployed the quote from Isaiah 52:5 to chastise the Jews of his generation in Romans 2:24, so Ignatius also deploys it. He uses it as a warning rather than a current state of affairs. Which means, therefore, that Ignatius sees the ‘flesh and blood’ of Jesus as the undoing of ‘foolishness,’ ‘evil,’ and ‘vanity.’ If so, the achievement of Jesus in eliminating such things from his own life, indeed, his own ‘flesh and blood,’ would logically undergird such a conviction.

The longer version adds some remarkable amplification:

‘Now I write these things unto you, not that I know there are any such persons among you; nay, indeed I hope that God will never permit any such report to reach my ears, He ‘who spared not His Son for the sake

¹⁸ Ibid, shorter version. Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Synodis* 47 quotes this passage and discusses its meaning in the context of the Arian disputation about the Son being ‘originate’ in terms of his humanity from Mary, and ‘unoriginate’ in terms of his divine relation from the Father. His reference indicates that Ignatius’ letters were discussed over two hundred years after they were penned.

¹⁹ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Trallians* 8, shorter version

²⁰ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Trallians* 7, shorter version

²¹ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Trallians* 6, shorter version

of His holy Church' [Romans 8:32]. But foreseeing the snares of the wicked one, I arm you beforehand by my admonitions, as my beloved and faithful children in Christ, furnishing you with the means of protection [literally, 'making you drink beforehand what will preserve you'] against the deadly disease of unruly men, by which do ye flee from the disease by the good-will of Christ our Lord. Do ye therefore, clothing yourselves with meekness, become the imitators of His sufferings, and of His love, wherewith He loved us when He gave Himself a ransom [Ephesians 2:4; 1 Timothy 2:6] for us, that He might cleanse us by His blood from our old ungodliness, and bestow life on us when we were almost on the point of perishing through the depravity that was in us. Let no one of you, therefore, cherish any grudge against his neighbour. For says our Lord, 'Forgive, and it shall be forgiven unto you.' [Matthew 6:14] Give no occasion to the Gentiles, lest 'by means of a few foolish men the word and doctrine [of Christ] be blasphemed.' [1 Timothy 6:1; Titus 2:5] For says the prophet, as in the person of God, 'Woe to him by whom my name is blasphemed among the Gentiles' [Isaiah 52:5].'²²

Once again, I am less interested in authorship than reception. Clearly these longer versions of Ignatius were valued and read alongside the shorter. This attests to the Christian community hearing in these words – attributed to Ignatius – a declaration of what they already believed.

The identification of sin with a 'disease' of sorts is stronger. Ignatius speaks 'against the deadly disease of unruly men.' He urges his audience to 'flee from the disease.' That same disease was one that Christians once shared. Indeed, 'we were almost on the point of perishing through the depravity that was in us.' The disease is manifested by 'cherish[ing] any grudge against [one's] neighbor,' and lacking forgiveness. Ignatius was probably concerned about these particular manifestations of sin on account of the persecution he and other Christians faced from 'the Gentiles.'

Correspondingly, the identification of Jesus as a physician and a medicine is stronger. Ignatius' 'admonitions' seem to specifically concern the self-giving of the Son and the Father's gift of the Son with the death of Jesus especially in view. His 'admonitions' thereby are 'furnishing you with the means of protection against the deadly disease' of sin. Our participation with Christ leads to being empowered to 'flee from the disease by the good-will of Christ our Lord.'

As Ignatius exhorts his readers to 'become the imitators of His sufferings, and of His love,' which includes his death for others, he links 'ransom' language to *cleansing*. 'When He gave Himself a ransom for us, that He might cleanse us by His blood from our old ungodliness, and bestow life on us.' Whereas other patristic writers link Jesus' work as our ransom over against the devil's authority and influence over us, Ignatius understands it differently. For the bishop from Antioch, the 'ransom' concerns ridding human nature of 'the depravity that was in us.' How is Jesus able to do this?

For Ignatius, this healing required the eternal Word of God to take up a truly human birth and body, which is what he discusses in the next two chapters. Ignatius (in the longer version) says in that context that Jesus 'clothed himself with a body of like passions with our own.'²³ The Greek word 'passion' would become, in later Christian writings, something that was *denied* to God in the sense that God could be influenced to act out of character with Himself, like Zeus and Mars regularly were. This is arguably how the word 'passion' is to be understood here.²⁴ Other Christian writers used the word 'passion' with reference to non-moral aspects of human existence, like thirst and hunger, and granted those to Jesus. How does the Ignatian seven letter corpus use the word 'passion'? In every instance but one, the word 'passion' is used in reference to Jesus' suffering and death, as in modern liturgical Christian use: 'the passion of Christ.' However, in the one other instance, Ignatius refers to emotions normally grouped in with anger: 'Be humble in response to their wrath; oppose to their blasphemies your earnest prayers; while they go astray, stand steadfast in the faith. Conquer their harsh temper by gentleness, their *passion* by meekness.'²⁵ This usage is decidedly negative. Thus, for Jesus to have a body of 'like passions with our own' does not mean that Ignatius believed Jesus capitulated to those 'passions.' But it can be reasonably offered that Ignatius himself, or, those who expanded on the original version of Ignatius' original (as the case may be), believed that

²² Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Trallians* 8, longer version

²³ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Trallians* 10, longer version

²⁴ Paul Gavriluk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

²⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 10, longer version

Jesus took on *fallen* humanity. This fits with the language of Jesus becoming ‘subject to corruption’ for our sakes in the longer version to the Ephesians, above. This, again, is medical substitutionary atonement. Jesus did *for us* what we could not do *for ourselves*: heal his human nature, and rid it of sin, by uniting it perfectly with God. He can therefore do *in us* what we cannot do *by ourselves*.

Ignatius’ Epistles and 2 Peter

The language and categories of thought of Ignatius move in much the same pattern as the New Testament letter 2 Peter. In that letter, Peter stresses a participatory paradigm of sharing in the life of Christ. He reminds them of the power and promises of Jesus, that ‘you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust’ (2 Pet.1:4). The term ‘corruption’ occurs two more times in connection with false teachers (2 Pet.2:10, 19), who ‘indulge the flesh’ (2 Pet.2:10) and ‘entice by fleshly desires’ (2 Pet.2:18). Like Ignatius’ quotation of a proverb about dogs, Peter quotes rather unflattering proverbs about dogs and pigs to characterize the false teachers (2 Pet.2:22). Although Peter was addressing the specific characteristics of false teachers, he clearly believed that the paradigm of salvation pertained to all in this way: humanity’s fleshly corruption needs ‘purification’ (2 Pet.1:9) and healing by our participation in ‘the divine nature’ in and through Jesus Christ. This Jesus was, as Peter reminds his audience, transfigured in the presence of witnesses (2 Pet.1:17 – 18), to demonstrate the purification of human nature that he perfected in his death and resurrection on our behalf. If Ignatius was influenced by Peter himself, and/or by 1 and 2 Peter, which is certainly possible given the numerous references in the Ignatian corpus to 1 Peter and one plausible reference to 2 Peter,²⁶ then this affinity for language and categories is anchored in a fairly reasonable historical explanation. It also finds a solid theological explanation, as 2 Peter contains the same concern.

Notably, 2 Peter contains statements that penal substitutionary atonement advocates have found difficult to interpret. ‘There will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master *who bought them*’ (2 Pet.2:2). ‘The Lord is... patient towards you, not wishing for *any* to perish but for *all* to come to repentance’ (2 Pet.3:9). On the face of it, Peter does not seem to uphold the notion of limited atonement, the idea that Jesus died only to save some people, which the penal substitutionary model seems to require in order to avoid a double accounting problem. The problem can be stated this way: Can God pour out His wrath twice – once on Jesus at the cross for ‘all’ and then another time on ‘the unrepentant’ in hell? This double accounting problem is what persuades many adherents of penal substitution to also hold (sometimes reluctantly) the companion doctrine of limited (or ‘definite’) atonement – God must pour out His wrath on the crucified Jesus for ‘the elect’ and then pours out the remainder of His wrath for ‘the non-elect’ directly in hell. Yet Peter does not appear to be using a model of atonement where the retributive justice (Calvin) of God is ‘satisfied’, or a legal-penal one in any sense, as he extends the atonement to the unrepentant false teachers: ‘There will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them’ (2 Pet.2:2). In the legal-penal satisfaction framework, Peter could only be mistaken about extending the atonement of Jesus to false teachers who are refusing and denying him. Hence the phrase, ‘the Master who bought them,’ raises concerns for penal substitution advocates. Is Peter suggesting that the false teachers’ denial of Jesus will have no material consequence for them? Hardly, for he speaks later of ‘the destruction of ungodly men’ (2 Pet.3:8). Why then does Peter speak of the atonement in an inclusive way?

If, however, Peter is articulating the atonement in a medical-ontological framework, then the problem of accounting for God’s wrath vanishes. The word ‘bought’ – whether its source is the Mediterranean marketplace or the Jewish exodus ransom – will need explanation. In the medical substitution atonement theology, Jesus ‘bought’ them in the sense that he paid the price to acquire a cleansed, purified humanity which is fully united with his divine nature, by his entire incarnation, life, death, and resurrection for their sakes. Since he did this for all people, with no limits on his side, he included even the humanity of the false teachers. The logical puzzle pieces are made explicit by Irenaeus, below. If the false teachers hold fast to the corruption in their human nature, Jesus will still call for their surrender and fiery purification. His wrath will be directed to the corruption in them, not at their personhood *per se*. But their ongoing stubborn resistance to his purifying love will cause their experience of his love to be torment.

Also, Peter does not seem to support the notion of God saving an ‘elect few’ or making a hidden, divine decree calling only some to salvation, which is also a companion doctrine to penal substitution and limited atonement: ‘The Lord is... patient towards you, not wishing for *any* to perish but for *all* to come to repentance’ (2 Pet.3:9).

²⁶ 2 Pet.3:9 appears to be quoted in *Ignatius’ Epistle to the Philadelphians* 11, longer version

Ezekiel also offers the same sentiment as Peter: ‘Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?’ (Ezk.18:23) If God limits the scope of the atonement to an elect number, then how can Scripture also speak of God’s desire for all to come to repentance?

In the Calvinist tradition, professor of theology at the University of Saumur, Moses Amyraut (1596 – 1664 AD), proposed a hypothetical universal predestination which then narrowed in scope based on God’s foreknowledge of people’s actual choices. But theologians Friedrich Spanheim (1600 – 1649 AD) at the University of Leiden and Francis Turretin (1623 – 1687 AD) at the Academy of Geneva, vigorously criticized this idea and defended Calvinist orthodoxy, which is, once again, hard to reconcile with this statement about God’s desire to save *all*.

In any case, it appears that neither Peter nor Ignatius had qualms about speaking this way. If Jesus substituted himself for Israel and personally defeated sin in his own flesh, even as measured against the tenth commandment which condemned all forms of covetousness, greed, lust, and jealousy (Rom.8:3), then he accomplished what no one else could – neither Israelite under the Sinai law (Rom.7:14 – 25), nor Gentile outside the Sinai covenant (Rom.2:12 – 16; 5:12 – 21). No wonder, then, that Jesus could offer his Spirit – the Spirit of his new humanity united with his divinity – to all, without reservation. This would explain why Ignatius, as a student of the apostles and heir of their teaching, believes that Jesus himself is the medicine available for the very men who are blaspheming him. Church historian Philip Schaff writes of Ignatius’ letters, ‘The central idea is *the renovation of man* (Eph.20), now under the power of Satan and Death (ib. 3, 19), which are undone in Christ, the risen Savior (Smyrn.3), who ‘is our true life,’ and endows us with immortality (Smyrn. 4, Magn. 6, Eph. 17).’²⁷ Jesus’ new humanity is the ‘cure’ for our corrupted humanity. It is what the eucharist points to: the ‘cleansing remedy to drive away evil.’

²⁷ Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series 2, Volume 4* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1867), p.37 emphasis mine