

## Medical Substitutionary Atonement in Tertullian of Carthage

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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.*’<sup>2</sup>

‘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.’<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.’<sup>5</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally, and still is, part of my lengthier paper exploring patristic atonement teaching, *Penal Substitution vs. Medical-Ontological Substitution: A Historical Comparison*. That paper can be found online on the website of The Anástasis Center for Christian Education and Ministry, on this page: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/atonement-sources-patristic>.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Father Henry Charles, *The Eucharist as Sacrifice*, November 19, 2006; [http://www.catholicnews-tt.net/v2005/series/euch\\_sacrifice191106.htm](http://www.catholicnews-tt.net/v2005/series/euch_sacrifice191106.htm); Father Charles is a Roman Catholic parish priest in Trinidad and Tobago

<sup>4</sup> Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p.14

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.162

human sinfulness, death, and the devil.<sup>6</sup> 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 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.

### **Tertullian of Carthage (160 – 220 AD)**

#### *Historical Context and Significance*

Tertullian was a scholar and writer from Carthage in Roman North Africa (160 – 220 AD). He is called the first Latin and ‘Western’ theologian, and is considered the fountainhead from which Latin Christian theology began, later developed by his disciple Cyprian who became bishop of Carthage. He was the first author to produce a significant body of written Latin Christian material. He seems to have received an excellent education. Like many in Roman North Africa, Tertullian was a skilled orator and lawyer, based on his use of legal analogies. He was very familiar with jurisprudence. Tertullian is sometimes cited as the first Christian thinker who articulated Jesus’ atonement in terms of a background of Roman law, justice, merit, and punishment. As such, he is praised by some who defend penal substitution, and he is criticized by various Eastern Orthodox writers for departing from the New Testament.

Significantly, Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach do not list Tertullian as being among the earliest witnesses to penal substitution. I assume from this silence that, in their reading of Tertullian, the three authors do not find sufficient evidence in Tertullian’s writings that support it. In this, I share their judgment.

#### *God as Trinity*

Tertullian’s view of the Trinity has been both appreciated and criticized, and we must consider whether a defective view of the Trinity affected his theology of the atonement. Tertullian was the first to use the word ‘Trinity’ to denote the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, he was speaking of the working of God in space-time, in history, for our salvation (the economic Trinity), and not about the being of God in eternity prior to creation (the immanent Trinity). Tertullian believed that a subtle shift within the being of God happened at the creation. He said: ‘God had not Word from the beginning.’ This is somewhat puzzling. However, in Tertullian’s defense, it has been noted that he counterbalances this with the assertion: ‘But He had Reason even before the beginning, because also Word itself consists of Reason, which it thus proves to have been the prior existence, as being its own substance.’ Moreover, he

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<sup>6</sup> Gustav Aulen, *Christus Victor* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998, originally published 1930), chs.1 – 5

states: ‘For although God had not yet sent His Word, He still had Him within Himself, both in company with, and included, in, His very Reason.’<sup>7</sup> I judge this to be a relatively minor problem of terminology in Tertullian.<sup>8</sup> Tertullian would say that God’s Reason became God’s Word as God spoke creation into existence, and God’s Word became human flesh for our redemption. Furthermore, Origen of Alexandria in Egypt (185 – 254 AD), within one generation of Tertullian and writing in both Greek and Latin at the closest major center of Christianity to Tertullian’s Carthage, spoke of God the Father and his Wisdom each being a *hypostasis* (Greek) and *substantia* (Latin), with the clear intention of declaring that the Wisdom of God is personal and eternal.<sup>9</sup> The use of these terms, which would become more fixed at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, gives us reason to assess Tertullian positively on this particular point.

#### *God’s Attributes and Humanity’s Fall Into Corruption*

In rebutting the heretic Marcion’s claim that the portrayal of God in the Old Testament makes God out to be terribly cruel and unjust, Tertullian relates God’s justice to His love. In this, Tertullian introduces a problematic shift. Although he begins well, he departs from a logically trinitarian way of organizing all the activities of God under the heading of God’s love:

‘Up to the fall of man, therefore, from the beginning God was simply good; after that He became a judge both severe and, as the Marcionites will have it, cruel...’<sup>10</sup> ‘But yet, when evil afterwards broke out, and the goodness of God began now to have an adversary to contend against, God’s justice also acquired another function, even that of directing His goodness according to men’s application for it. And this is the result: the divine goodness, being interrupted in that free course whereby God was spontaneously good, is now dispensed according to the deserts of every man; it is offered to the worthy, denied to the unworthy, taken away from the unthankful, and also avenged on all its enemies. Thus the entire office of justice in this respect becomes an agency for goodness: whatever it condemns by its judgment, whatever it chastises by its condemnation, whatever (to use your phrase) it ruthlessly pursues, it, in fact, benefits with good instead of injuring... Thus far, then, justice is the very fullness of the Deity Himself, manifesting God as both a perfect father and a perfect master: a father in His mercy, a master in His discipline; a father in the mildness of His power, a master in its severity; a father who must be loved with dutiful affection, a master who must needs be feared; be loved, because He prefers mercy to sacrifice; [Hosea 6:6] be feared because He dislikes sin; be loved, because He prefers the sinner’s repentance to his death; [Ezekiel 33:11] be feared, because He dislikes the sinners who do not repent. Accordingly, the divine law enjoins duties in respect of both these attributes: You shall love God, and, You shall fear God. It proposed one for the obedient man, the other for the transgressor.’<sup>11</sup>

Tertullian starts out accurately: Prior to creation, and prior to the fall, God was simply good. Judging is a secondary activity of God which had not been expressed prior to creation. But just as in mathematics where you cannot maximize two variables at once – you must logically maximize one variable and then the second relative to it – Tertullian’s theology starts to unravel. He seems to universalize the Sinai covenant with Israel as if God related to everyone that way as a function of His character, and therefore Tertullian seems to make deductions about the character of God primarily from within Sinaitic Israel’s experience of blessings and curses. He conceives of God as a father and then as a master. Tertullian divides loving God from fearing (reverencing) God as if loving and fearing were always meant to pertain to two different groups of people. However, the two postures towards humanity cannot coexist in the same way and on the same level within the character of God. So the master wins out over the father in the end. Tertullian makes the meritocratic-retributive justice of God ascend to a place that is at least co-equal to, and arguably higher than, the love of God. He postulates that God must dislike sinners who do not repent, and reverses the meaning of Ezekiel 33:11 to make it conditional on the person’s response. For Tertullian, God’s primary characteristic is meritocratic-retributive justice. Those who love Him, He loves. Those who disobey Him,

<sup>7</sup> Tertullian of Carthage, *Against Praxeas* 5

<sup>8</sup> Tertullian wrote about the equality of the three persons in *substantia*, *status*, and *potestas* (substance, status, and power, in *Against Praxeas* 2 and *Against Marcion* 4.25); his distinction between *gradus*, *forma*, and *species* (*Against Praxeas* 2) points to the distinction between the persons and order of procession.

<sup>9</sup> Origen of Alexandria, *On Principles*, 1.2: ‘If, then, it is once rightly understood that the only-begotten Son of God is His Wisdom hypostatically existing, I know not whether our curiosity ought to advance beyond this, or entertain any suspicion that that *hypostasis* or *substantia* contains anything of a bodily nature... Who that is capable of entertaining reverential thoughts of feelings regarding God, can suppose or believe that God the Father ever existed, even for a moment of time, without having generated this Wisdom?’

<sup>10</sup> Tertullian of Carthage, *Adversus Marcionem*, bk.2, ch.11

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, bk.2, ch.13

He punishes. At this point, love appears to be subordinate to meritocratic-retributive justice.

Later, Tertullian tries to regroup God's judging activity back under His love. Notably, he switches metaphors for God from the judge to the doctor, because by using the doctor analogy, he is able to separate the true object of God's wrath (the disease) from true object of God's love (the person):

'Even His severity then is good, because just: when the judge is good, that is just. Other qualities likewise are good, by means of which the good work of a good severity runs out its course, whether wrath, or jealousy, or sternness. For all these are as indispensable to severity as severity is to justice. The shamelessness of an age, which ought to have been reverent, had to be avenged. Accordingly, qualities which pertain to the judge, when they are actually free from blame, as the judge himself is, will never be able to be charged upon him as a fault. What would be said, if, when you thought the doctor necessary, you were to find fault with his instruments, because they cut, or cauterize, or amputate, or tighten; whereas there could be no doctor of any value without his professional tools?'<sup>12</sup>

No wonder we are confused when reading Tertullian. Tertullian himself was confused and disorganized. Tertullian is also quite confused about the meaning of God expelling Adam and Eve from the garden. Here is a passage where he explains his interpretation of that passage. My comments are directly inserted into the brackets below:

'Now, although Adam was by reason of his condition under law subject to death, yet was hope preserved to him by the Lord's saying, 'Behold, Adam has become as one of us;' that is, in consequence of the future taking of the man into the divine nature. [*This interpretation, while admirably hopeful, is not exactly the meaning of God's utterance in Genesis 3:22; God did not simply impose a 'law' unto death because of divine retribution, but because of divine mercy, preventing humans from eating from the tree of life while in a corrupted state.*] Then what follows? And now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, (and eat), and live for ever. Inserting thus the particle of present time, 'And now,' He shows that He had made for a time, and at present, a prolongation of man's life. [*This is grammatically strained, and narratively false; God prevented Adam and Eve from eating from the tree of life, and allowed them to begin the long process of 'dying you will die' as stated in Genesis 2:17; Tertullian apparently believed that God verbally promised to strike them dead immediately upon eating from the tree of knowledge.*] Therefore He did not actually curse Adam and Eve, for they were candidates for restoration [*This is ambiguous; it is possible that their human nature was, in fact, cursed, based on the narrative*], and they had been relieved by confession [*They were not relieved by confession per se, but by hoping in the messianic 'seed of the woman' prophecy of Genesis 3:14 – 15*]. Cain, however, He not only cursed [*Tertullian is wrong here; Cain cursed himself, and God diagnosed Cain's relation to the ground as cursed, in Genesis 4:11*]; but when he wished to atone for his sin by death [*Cain did not want to atone for his sins; he did not want to die; he wanted protection from being murdered out of vengeance!*], He even prohibited his dying, so that he had to bear the load of this prohibition in addition to his crime [*That is an incorrect way to interpret what seems to be God's mercy and protection to Cain, and invitation to repent.*]<sup>13</sup>

Tertullian is a bit contradictory, unlike Irenaeus, who as both a biblical scholar and systematic theologian was very clear and consistent about the meaning of this story. Tertullian seems to want to make of Adam, Eve, and Cain moral examples – either of penitence and confession (Adam and Eve), or the lack thereof (Cain). Tertullian's exegesis bears a distinctly Latin cultural flavor. Seeing Cain as wanting to atone for his sin by dying is beyond any reasonable reading of the text of Genesis 4:13 – 14. Cain was simply frustrated with God, and wanted to emotionally manipulate God. Why Tertullian sees God as prolonging Cain's life and imposing penance is even more mysterious and difficult to explain from a trinitarian standpoint. Confusion about this episode will contribute to mistakes Tertullian makes downstream. In addition, Tertullian does not understand God's expulsion of Adam and Eve as protecting them from eternalizing sin within themselves, and therefore God's motivation of love even in the expulsion.

#### *Fallen Human Nature and God's Grace*

Matthew Craig Steenberg sees Tertullian maintaining a place for human beings as *developmental* in nature, and I

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, bk.2, ch.16

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, bk.2, ch.25

appreciate Steenberg's sympathetic analysis of Tertullian's writings on the subject.<sup>14</sup> However, Gösta Hallonsten, who writes the concluding chapter in *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, which is dedicated to exploring the doctrine of *theosis*, argues that Tertullian began to weaken Irenaeus' theological anthropology. Irenaeus believed that human beings partake of the Holy Spirit in a preliminary sense by virtue of creation, and must choose to grow into full communion with God by further reception of the Word and Spirit. A *static* view of human beings, by contrast, tends to reduce to an emphasis on legal standing before God. Although Tertullian 'was highly dependent on Irenaeus,' as Hallonsten notes, his

'...later writings, however, are marked by the strong opposition to Gnosticism and hence stress more emphatically that the human as a created being, notwithstanding its spiritual part, is of a clearly distinct genus or species. Through this, Tertullian aims at avoiding the Gnostic thought of a divine spark in human beings and hence a predetermined salvation for the few. Tertullian's emphasis on the relative independence and special character of creature in relation to Creator, however, seems to be a common inheritance in the subsequent Latin tradition. Thus, we see the tendency to distinguish between nature and grace in a way that is foreign to Eastern tradition.'<sup>15</sup>

If I am correctly interpreting Hallonsten's statement, and the historical and cultural trends in Christian theology which he describes, Tertullian contributed to an eventual difference between Eastern and Western Christianity over how we view the human being. Irenaeus viewed the human being in a developmental paradigm: the human person is a partner with God in the formation of her or his own human nature. This developmental view of the human being offers the only adequate explanation for the biblical data: why God created human beings to live in a narrative, why human nature and the human will even prior to the fall needed development through intentional partnership with God, why human nature in eternity will become fixed in its orientation for or against God, and why the medical-medical substitutionary atonement model provides the only logical foundation for our healing and renewed development into fuller union with God. This paradigm continues in Eastern Orthodoxy. Tertullian, by contrast, began a trend to see the human person as fundamentally separated from God and therefore accumulating merit or demerits in a ledger external to the person, and held by a God who keeps such accounts. This emphasis came to influence the Latin-based Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. This tendency to distinguish between nature (namely, human will) and grace (that is, God's will) would return in Augustine, the greatest North African Latin theologian, who placed them in a competitive rather than complementary relation.<sup>16</sup>

### *The Incarnation*

Tertullian's treatment of human nature since the fall seems to have influenced his view of the incarnation. He held to the mistaken doctrine of traducianism and the view of human nature which went with it. Traducianism was the belief that the souls of parents generate the souls of their children, in addition to their bodies. Stoic philosophers held to this belief. Tertullian, following the Stoic assumption, said:

'Every soul, then, by reason of its birth, has its nature in Adam until it is born again in Christ; moreover it is unclean all the while that it remains without this regeneration (Baptism); and because unclean, it is actively sinful, and suffuses even the flesh with its own shame... The corruption of our nature is another nature having a god and father of its own, namely the author of (that) corruption [i.e. the devil]. Still there is a portion of good in the soul, of that original, divine, and genuine good, which is its proper nature. For that which is derived from God is rather obscured than extinguished. It can be obscured, indeed, because it is

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew Craig Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009), ch.2

<sup>15</sup> Gösta Hallonsten, 'Theosis in Recent Research: A Renewal of Interest and a Need for Clarity,' edited by Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), p.285 – 286.

<sup>16</sup> Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993 2nd edition), p.219 – 220, notes, 'According to Augustine, man in Paradise was endowed from the start with all possible wisdom and knowledge: his was a realized, and in no sense potential, perfection. The dynamic conception of Irenaeus clearly fits more easily with modern theories of evolution than does the static conception of Augustine.' Note that Ambrose of Milan (340 – 397), who led Augustine to faith, also held to a developmental view of humanity in creation where nature and grace are mutually intertwined (Ambrose of Milan, *Paradise*, chapter 5, paragraph 29; dated between 374 to 383 AD). Augustine was in Milan from the fall of 384 to the summer of 386 AD in his early 30's, so his neglect of Ambrose's teaching requires explanation. Furthermore, Augustine might have quoted Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.30.1 in *Christian Doctrine* 2.40.60; he certainly quoted from *Against Heresies* 4.2.7 and 5.19.1 in his writings against Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum (*Contra Julian* 1.3.5), and even mentions Irenaeus by name (1.7.32), yet apparently failed to understand Irenaeus on this point as well. ([http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/history\\_timothy\\_ware\\_2.htm#n2](http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/history_timothy_ware_2.htm#n2))

not God; extinguished, however, it cannot be, because it comes from God.’<sup>17</sup>

Tertullian believed that *the soul* was unclean, and infected *the body* with its uncleanness, or otherwise added to the problem of bodily mortality. This may have contributed to his faulty exegesis of Genesis where he interpreted Adam, Eve, and Cain as examples or not of penitence, which is a movement of the soul. For Tertullian, Jesus therefore needed to become incarnate in such a way so as to avoid the problem of possessing a human soul because it would necessarily be a corrupt one. This may have led Tertullian to have the same concerns as Apollinarius, the fourth century theologian who believed that the Word replaced the human soul in the human body of Jesus. We do not observe this in Tertullian’s writing per se, but the logic of laying out the human categories in this way demands a solution.

Lactantius, Ambrose, and Jerome all repudiated traducianism<sup>18</sup> as did the Catholic Church as a whole.<sup>19</sup> They held that each soul was created by God, and that the human body of each person began in a state of deprivation because of the fall. However, the impact of Tertullian’s thought, and/or the impact of Stoic philosophy, upon Christian theology seems to recur in the Latin bishops Hilary of Poitiers (315 – 367 AD) and Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 AD). Hilary believed that Jesus was not truly subject to ordinary human pain and needs like hunger and thirst, but only ate and drank to fit in with human custom.<sup>20</sup> Augustine praised Mary’s immaculate conception for conceiving Jesus without any sexual desire, since Augustine defined sexual desire even for one’s spouse (sadly) as a manifestation of the soul’s fallenness which would itself corrupt the new human soul<sup>21</sup> contrary to the Jewish celebration of marital sexuality (e.g. Pr.5:19; Song 3:6 – 5:1) and Paul’s approval of marital sex as for the couple, not simply for procreative purposes (1 Cor.7:1 – 5). Augustine was drawn towards traducianism because it seemed to explain the transmission of the guilt of Adam and Eve to their descendants, not simply their corrupted human nature. I suspect that the early fathers, who did not distinguish lust as an intentional, focused decision from an aesthetic appreciation of the human body as beautiful, or from awareness of sexual desire in a latent but unfocused sense, felt they needed to protect Jesus from experiencing all of the above. Hence, they simply called all sexual desire ‘concupiscence,’ or ‘lust,’ even the sexual attraction between husband and wife. Preachers and commentators worked hard to interpret the *Song of Songs* allegorically, as referring to Christ and the church, so as not to admit that the sexual attraction between husband and wife was to be celebrated. Married men ordained to church office were asked to make their marriages celibate.

By the fifth century, the view of Emmanuel Hatzidakis, which I covered above while discussing Irenaeus, started to emerge strongly: Jesus must have cleansed human nature at his conception in an instantaneous manner, and basically acquired a pre-fall Adamic humanity at his incarnation. Inconsistencies started emerging in how the fathers handle various biblical texts. For example, John Cassian in Gaul struggled to explain Paul’s assertion that Jesus came ‘in the *likeness* of sinful flesh’ in Romans 8:3.<sup>22</sup> The theologians know well that Paul said Jesus was ‘in human *likeness*’ in Philippians 2:7. But they make the word ‘*likeness*’ mean ‘in the appearance only’ in Romans, and ‘in the reality of’ in Philippians. But did this make lexical sense? Also, the death of Jesus started to take on greater significance in their minds, to explain, for instance, the Hebraic language of the ‘curse’ of Galatians 3:13. The overall teaching on atonement is still far from penal substitution; it is still incarnational and medical. But the pastoral significance of these moves was to diminish Jesus as an encouragement and source of strength for ordinary human beings struggling with temptation, sexual or otherwise.

From what does Jesus save us, in the thought of Tertullian? In the work dedicated to exploring the humanity of Jesus, *De Carne Christi (On the Flesh of Christ)*, Tertullian departs from the authors I have considered above: Ignatius, Irenaeus, the Odes of Solomon, Justin Martyr, and Melito of Sardis. He says that Jesus destroyed ‘the birthmark of sin’ in human flesh, not through his lifelong obedience and at his death, but at his incarnation:

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<sup>17</sup> Tertullian of Carthage, *De Anima (A Treatise on the Soul)*, 40 – 41; cf19

<sup>18</sup> Lactantius, *De Opificio Dei (On the Workmanship of God)*, 19, 1ff.

<sup>19</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Number 366

<sup>20</sup> Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 10.23; Hilary is criticized by T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, p.162, and Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh*, p.24; Angelo Di Berardino, *Patrology* (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, Inc., 1986), p.57 says, ‘In this context, Hilary proposes the idea of the human body of Christ as a real body but a celestial one, devoid of imperfections and capable of feeling the violence of the passion but not the pain; an idea that is not without a slightest hint of Docetism (X.18, 23).’

<sup>21</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, 14:24; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, book 3, question 31, articles 4 – 5 repeated the view that sexual desire itself transmitted some corruption to the newly conceived child

<sup>22</sup> John Cassian, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 4.3; but compare to 4.6 ‘being made in the *likeness* of men’

‘We maintain, moreover, that what has been abolished in Christ is not *carnem peccati* (‘*sinful flesh*’), but *peccatum carnis* (‘*sin in the flesh*’) — not the material thing, but its condition; not the substance, but its flaw; and (this we aver) on the authority of the apostle, who says, ‘He abolished sin in the flesh’ [*a misunderstanding of Romans 8:3*]. Now in another sentence he says that Christ was in the likeness of sinful flesh, not, however, as if He had taken on Him the likeness of the flesh, in the sense of a semblance of body instead of its reality; but he means us to understand likeness to the flesh which sinned, because the flesh of Christ, which committed no sin itself, resembled that which had sinned—resembled it in its nature, but not in the corruption it received from Adam; whence we also affirm that there was in Christ the same flesh as that whose nature in man is sinful. In the flesh, therefore, we say that sin has been abolished, because in Christ that same flesh is maintained without sin, which in man was not maintained without sin. Now, it would not contribute to the purpose of Christ’s abolishing sin in the flesh, if He did not abolish it in that flesh in which was the nature of sin, nor (would it conduce) to His glory. For surely it would have been no strange thing if He had removed the stain of sin in some better flesh, and one which should possess a different, even a sinless, nature! Then, you say, if He took our flesh, Christ’s was a sinful one. Do not, however, fetter with mystery a sense which is quite intelligible. *For in putting on our flesh, He made it His own; in making it His own, He made it sinless.* A word of caution, however, must be addressed to all who refuse to believe that our flesh was in Christ on the ground that it came not of the seed of a human father, let them remember that Adam himself received this flesh of ours without the seed of a human father. As earth was converted into this flesh of ours without the seed of a human father, so also was it quite possible for the Son of God to take to Himself the substance of the selfsame flesh, without a human father’s agency.’<sup>23</sup>

For Tertullian, as with the other patristic theologians, Jesus uniting divine nature and fallen human nature in himself is the basis of God’s offer of salvation, of human nature, to others. As he argues with the gnostic heretics Marcion and Valentinus who denied Jesus’ true and actual humanity, Tertullian writes about Jesus taking on human flesh. Tertullian belabors the point by saying that Jesus did not take on angelic nature to himself, an idea Tertullian evidently felt he needed to refute because some gnostics suggested it; but Jesus wanted to bring about the salvation of human beings, and thus he took on human nature.<sup>24</sup>

However, Tertullian differs from Irenaeus and others in his treatment of Romans 8:3 and his understanding of the flesh of Jesus. Tertullian explicitly says that the flesh of Christ had the same nature as Adam, but not the same corruption. This is probably due to his traducianism. He replaces the apostle Paul’s term ‘condemn’ with ‘abolish’ in his reading of Romans 8:3, which is problematic. For Paul in Romans, to ‘condemn’ something is to cause it to die, which ties up ‘condemnation’ language that he started to discuss with Adam in Romans 5:12 – 21. In effect, Tertullian believes that Jesus’ incarnation *instantly* purified the human nature he took on from Adamic corruption, whereas Irenaeus and others held that Jesus purified it by facing temptation and overcoming it all the way to his death, where the corruption was finally defeated. The earlier theologians would have agreed with Paul’s view that the Sinai covenant and its laws were good and holy, that it helped Israel diagnose the indwelling presence of sin within themselves (Rom.7:14 – 25), but could not bring them victory because the Sinai covenant was always meant to be fulfilled by Jesus, the true Israel and the climax of the covenant (Rom.10:4). In this way, Tertullian was actually losing ground to the very gnostic influences he was so eager to defeat, detaching himself historically from the other patristic Christian theologians, and detaching Christ’s connection to our common fallen humanity.

Tertullian departs from Irenaeus’ use of ‘image’ and ‘likeness.’ It is true that at times, Tertullian uses ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ in a similar way to Irenaeus. For example, when discussing the resurrection, Tertullian refers to our material body as the ‘image,’ and the breath of God as the ‘likeness’:

‘God fashioned this flesh with his hands in his own image. He animated it with his breath in the likeness of his own vitality.’<sup>25</sup>

Irenaeus also referred to the physical form of the human body as the ‘image.’ But he did not reduce the ‘likeness’

<sup>23</sup> Tertullian of Carthage, *De Carne Christi (On the Flesh of Christ)* 16; curiously, Demetrios Bathrellos, ‘The Patristic Tradition on the Sinlessness of Jesus,’ edited by Markus Vinzent, *Studia Patristica Volume LXIII*, Sixteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies in Oxford 2011, p.236 – 237, opens his observations of the patristic period with this very passage from Tertullian.

<sup>24</sup> Tertullian of Carthage, *De Carne Christi* 14

<sup>25</sup> Tertullian of Carthage, *De Resurrectione (On the Resurrection of the Flesh)* 9

down to the breath first breathed into Adam, because the breath merely animated Adam's otherwise lifeless body as 'psychical' or 'a living soul' (1 Cor.15:45 – 49). Rather, Irenaeus regarded 'likeness' as participation in the Holy Spirit in a fully realized, endless way.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Tertullian destabilizes the meaning of these terms. In fact, he used these terms to denote the human soul ('image') and its freedom ('likeness' unto God). He did not include the human body in his use of these terms elsewhere. Daniélou notes, 'The essential point, however, remains valid, namely that it is man's soul which is made in the likeness of God and above all reflects his freedom. In this, Tertullian's thought was profoundly original, and was to have a great influence on Latin theological thinking after his time.'<sup>27</sup> Note Daniélou's recognition of Tertullian's originality, which should also be understood as his divergence from Irenaeus, whom he had certainly read. Tertullian's reduction of 'likeness' to mere 'resemblance' (of freedom) absent 'participation' would negatively influence his interpretation of Romans 8:3.

Tellingly, Tertullian is also a bit unclear about whether Jesus really experienced temptation during his earthly life.<sup>28</sup> Strictly speaking, if Tertullian were to logically follow through from this point, he might have asserted that Jesus could have been transfigured, and even ascended to the Father, at any time after his incarnation without dying on the cross and being resurrected. For what reason, in Tertullian's mind, did Jesus have to undergo death? He does say that Jesus had to fulfill Scripture, and to experience death out of his human solidarity with the rest of humankind, which lies under the power of death because of the fall.<sup>29</sup> But these are partial explanations at best. At least in *De Carne Christi*, he does not give any further explanation for the necessity of Jesus' death.

### *Jesus' Death on the Cross*

Why, then, did Jesus have to die? In a work called *De Fuge in Persecutione (On Running Away from Persecution)*, Tertullian rebukes Christians who would pay the Roman authorities the bribe they demanded to get other Christians released from a death sentence. Saying that such a payment devalues the 'payment' Jesus made on our behalf, Tertullian deploys the following argument:

'God...spared not His own Son for you, that He might be made a curse for us, because cursed is he that hangeth on a tree, Him who was led as a sheep to be a sacrifice, and just as a lamb before its shearer, so opened He not His mouth; but gave His back to the scourges, nay, His cheeks to the hands of the smiter, and turned not away His face from spitting, and, being numbered with the transgressors, was delivered up to death, nay, the death of the cross. All this took place that He might redeem us from our sins. The sun ceded to us the day of our redemption; hell re-transferred the right it had in us, and our covenant is in heaven; the everlasting gates were lifted up, that the King of Glory, the Lord of might, might enter in, after having redeemed man from earth, nay, from hell, that he might attain to heaven. What, now, are we to think of the man who strives against that glorious One, nay, slights and defiles His goods, obtained at so great a ransom – no less, in truth, than His most precious blood? It appears, then, that it is better to flee than to fall in value, if a man will not lay out for himself as much as he cost Christ. And the Lord indeed ransomed him from the angelic powers which rule the world – from the spirits of wickedness, from the darkness of this life, from eternal judgment, from everlasting death.'<sup>30</sup>

Certainly paying out bribes or kidnapping ransoms for fellow Christians would become a practical and ethical problem in itself. Tertullian constructs, not an ethical argument, primarily, but a theological argument. He connects the self-offering of Jesus' death as a redemption from human sin, a redemption from hell, and a ransom from the angelic powers which rule the world. A wide range of problems are thus arrayed in connection with Jesus' death, packed in tight and dense rhetoric, rather than explained.

Positioning Jesus' death as a 'payment' to outweigh and counteract the 'payment' requested by the Roman

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<sup>26</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 5.6.1; 5.16.2; John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.48, 99 – 100 says, 'But when this Spirit, commingled with the soul, is united to the handiwork, because of the outpouring of the Spirit man is rendered spiritual and perfect, and this is the one who was made in the image and likeness of God. But if the Spirit is lacking from the soul, such a one, remaining indeed animated and fleshly, will be imperfect, having the image, certainly, in the handiwork, but not receiving the likeness through the Spirit.' Cf. p.114 – 115.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Daniélou, *History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea, Volume 3: The Origins of Latin Christianity*, translated and edited by David Smith and John Austin Baker (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1977), p.382 – 383; cf.371 – 383.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid 7; in 9, he reduces the devil's temptations in the wilderness to Jesus' physical hunger, rather than maintaining that the Adamic corruption in Jesus humanity made self-centeredness the larger and more powerful temptation

<sup>29</sup> Ibid 6

<sup>30</sup> Tertullian, *De Fuge in Persecutione* 12, v.3 – 5



authorities risks being reductionist and placing God in the same role categorically as the Roman authorities. But that is precisely what is at issue: Did Tertullian think that Jesus offered a ‘payment’ to God at his death, as penal substitution asserts? Tertullian does use the term ‘blood’ in the sense of Jesus’ life expended as a type of payment. Was this a payment to God, to satisfy His offended retributive justice? In a semantic sense, Tertullian can be read as edging in that direction. He differs from Justin Martyr by isolating the death of Jesus over against the rest of his life vis-à-vis the ‘curse.’ He does not define what ‘curse’ Jesus experienced uniquely at the cross; when he writes against his opponent Praxeas, he connects the curse with the Sinai law,<sup>31</sup> although what he means by this is a bit uncertain. Likely that for Tertullian, there was not an ‘extra’ punishment that Jesus received upon himself, such as ‘hell’ on the cross, a later theory promoted by some Reformers. Rather, Tertullian seems to believe death *by itself* was the curse or penalty from God that Jesus took on himself.

Tertullian therefore believed something different than Irenaeus about human death. For Tertullian, death is *only* a penalty from God, and a more or less judicial one at that. But Irenaeus said that Jesus used death as a tool by which he defeated the corruption of sin within himself. For Irenaeus, death is an ontological consequence as much *imposed upon God* in His love, by Adam and Eve, because He had to respond in love to the corruption of Adam and Eve. It was not a proportional judicial response from God out of His justice. But Tertullian, taking the Latin cultural preoccupation with merit, alters the meaning of human death vis-à-vis the character of God.

Is this penal substitution? In my opinion, it comes close. But Tertullian specialist Robert E. Roberts explains why it is not:

‘It would be natural to expect that we should find in Tertullian, with his legal training, a forensic statement of the atonement wrought by Christ, but no such statement is to be found in his writings, or, indeed, to be detected in the background of his thought. He uses the term *satisfacere*, it is true, but never in the sense of vicarious satisfaction. With him it means invariably the amends which men make for their own sins by confession, repentance, and good works.’<sup>32</sup>

In other words, for Tertullian, God is ‘satisfied’ by our apology to Him and repentance. God’s ‘satisfaction’ is not measured against God’s retributive justice as if it were a divine attribute equal and opposite God’s love, as it would be later for John Calvin. It is neither *categorical* nor *instantaneous*, that is, happening all at once, when Jesus hung on the cross and absorbed hell, or when he died. It is *personal*, that is, from person to person, and *dynamically ongoing*, in relation to the ups and downs of human behaviors and attitudes. This is probably what led Tertullian to think that Adam and Eve were rewarded with a taste from the tree of life because of their penitence, serving as the prototypical penitent figures. In this, Tertullian begins to read the categories of Latin culture (merit, penance, etc.) into the biblical text and concerns of theology. Why Tertullian believed that certain sins committed by Christians should not be forgiven by the church (murder, idolatry, fraud, apostasy, blasphemy, adultery, and fornication) even though God forgives them<sup>33</sup> may or may not be logically connected to Tertullian’s theology per se; pastoral flaws often flow out of personality quirks, as it did for Tertullian, who was a rigid perfectionist in temperament, as seen by his attraction to the demanding and heretical Montanist movement, in part because of his disgust with Christian mediocrity. Nevertheless, Roberts suggests that Tertullian did not think of God’s anger towards human sin as a divine attribute in tension or in conflict with God’s love for human beings, and Tertullian’s jumbling of the medical doctor analogy and the legal judge analogy leaves himself confused about what Scripture means, and interpreters confused about what Tertullian means. It appears that Tertullian still tries to uphold the view that God’s anger or wrath was an *activity* of God which flowed out of the deeper *attribute* of God: God’s unchanging love for us. Since God’s love is unchanging, it is that which makes God immutable. This corresponds with God being a Trinity, that is, a communion of love within Himself. If only Tertullian had been consistently trinitarian as a theologian and biblical exegete.

More could be said in appreciation and critique of Tertullian. But for my purpose of highlighting Tertullian’s atonement theology, I will stop here to draw a conclusion. Although Tertullian mistakenly believed that Jesus instantly purified human nature at his incarnation, thus rendering other aspects of Jesus’ life and death less

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<sup>31</sup> Tertullian, *Adversus Praxeas* 29, ‘But when we assert that Christ was crucified, we do not malign Him with a curse; we only re-affirm the curse pronounced by the law...’

<sup>32</sup> Robert E. Roberts, *The Theology of Tertullian*, Epworth Press, 1924, ch.9; [http://www.tertullian.org/articles/roberts\\_theology/roberts\\_00\\_index.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/articles/roberts_theology/roberts_00_index.htm); last accessed August 8, 2013

<sup>33</sup> Tertullian, *On Modesty* 19, 21

intelligible, he still accurately maintained the view that Jesus had to, in some way, undo the Adamic corruption in human nature. He also maintained the view that salvation and redemption was achieved from within the person of Jesus, in his uniting of the two natures, in a cosmic drama. And this did fit into the overarching trinitarian framework which was intact enough in Tertullian's mind that he did not recognize an attribute of God, equal and opposite to God's love, that needed to be 'satisfied,' whether it be labeled God's retributive justice, holiness, wrath, offended honor, and so on. God did not pour out on Jesus some additional quantity of wrath on top of death itself. For Tertullian, salvation did not involve a legal punishment absorbed by Jesus extrinsic to his person. For death was still intrinsic to the person of Jesus, something he had to share in and go through. By bursting through the domain of death, even death as conceived of as a *generic* punishment from God, into resurrection, Jesus rescues human nature from the evil spiritual powers of this world, offers rescue to human beings through union with himself. Hence, while Tertullian was fairly confused about the mechanics and timing of the medical substitutionary atonement held by his contemporaries, he did not believe in penal substitution.