

Models of Atonement

We have looked at soteriology in terms of biblical themes, movements on the way to salvation, and Calvinist and Arminian traditions. We will now turn to theories about how the work of Christ brings about atonement. The word **atonement** (“at-one-ment”) was coined, in English, to describe the way Christ’s work bridges the separation between humans and God, opening up the possibility that we may again be reconciled to, or made one with, God. Each model of atonement has strengths and weaknesses—sometimes the same characteristic is both a strength and a weakness—as it attempts faithful speech about the work of Christ.

Deification

This first model for understanding atonement emphasizes connections between the incarnation and the whole of humanity. The idea of **deification** is summarized by Athanasius in his work on the incarnation. He says, “[Christ], indeed, assumed humanity, that we might become God.”²⁶ This is a startling statement, and Athanasius is well aware of that fact. Athanasius affirms the difference between the Creator and creation, yet he stands in a theological tradition that is willing to speak of human transformation in strong terms, that sees the work of Christ as drawing us into the very life of God. The logic is there in the short statement quoted above. Atonement involves a double movement: (1) God comes to us, in incarnate unity with us, in order to (2) bring us to God, in unity with the divine life.

Deification is usually identified as the soteriological tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy. Contemporary Russian Orthodox theologian Andrew Louth writes that deification “has to do with human destiny, a destiny that finds its fulfillment in a face-to-face encounter with God, an encounter in which God takes the initiative by meeting us in the Incarnation.”²⁷ The model’s strengths are in (1) taking the cosmic nature of salvation seriously; (2) dealing with the biblical witness to real transfor-

²⁶ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), 93.

²⁷ Andrew Louth, “The Place of *Theosis* in Eastern Orthodoxy,” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, ed. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 34.

mation as the end of human salvation (for example, Peter’s quotation of Leviticus, “For it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am p 159 holy’” [1 Pet. 1:16]); and (3) being based in the person of Jesus, his humanity and his divinity. Critics of the deification model fear that it violates the distinction between Creator and creature. Another drawback of the model is that Christ’s work in the cross and resurrection takes a place peripheral to the incarnation itself. Deification, as a model of atonement, is more like poetry than logic. In Louth’s words, “[Christ] shared our life, to the point of death, that we might be redeemed from death and come to share the divine life. This notion of an exchange, of what the Latin Fathers call *admirabile commercium* (wonderful exchange), is the place where deification fits; it is not so much a doctrine to be analyzed, as a way of capturing the nature and extent of our response to the Incarnation.”²⁸

Christus Victor

Gustaf Aulén (1879–1977) made an influential argument that the early church conceptualized atonement in terms of Christ’s cosmic victory over sin and death. Aulén describes this ***Christus Victor*** (Christ the Victor) model of atonement as “‘dramatic.’ Its central theme is the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ—Christus Victor—fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the ‘tyrants’ under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself.”²⁹ The model images Christ’s victory over the powers in battle metaphors. As a cosmic view of atonement, the model sees the work of Christ as extending far beyond the individual to the whole of creation. Many church fathers, in describing Christ’s victory, give Satan and evil powers an important role in the drama of redemption: Satan reigns over creation through death but is tricked by Jesus’s humanity into thinking Jesus is fair prey. Because Jesus is God, when Satan tries to seize him, the power of death is exploded. A great strength of this model is that it takes death—and not sin alone—seriously as an enemy defeated in Jesus, and this means the model takes

²⁸ Louth, “Place of *Theosis*,” 32.

²⁹ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 4.

resurrection seriously as well. Theologians don't agree about whether the role given to Satan is a strength or a weakness of the model.

Cross-Centered Models: Satisfaction, Forensic, and Substitutionary Atonement

The next category for atonement models is most often identified with the medieval theologian Anselm of Canterbury and his answer to a key question: p 160 Why did God become human? Anselm sees the person of Jesus Christ—two natures in hypostatic unity—as God's uniquely fitting response to sin. He uses a metaphor for sin that fits his context: the debt of honor owed to the feudal lord. We owe God full honor, and our debt is so large that it is impossible for us to satisfy it. Anselm explains, "All the will of a rational creature ought to be subject to the will of God.... Someone who does not render to God this honour due to him is taking away from God what is his.... This is what it is to sin. As long as he does not repay what he has taken away, he remains in a state of guilt."³⁰ We are debtors who cannot pay—or make satisfaction for—what we owe. No human is capable of doing so. Only God has the power to do something so immense. Yet, Anselm argues, justice requires that humans pay the debt, which belongs to humans. Anselm argues that if God were to erase the debt without payment, then God would cease to be either just or faithful.

This is the logic behind the gift of the incarnation. Only Jesus, fully God and fully human, is both *able to pay* the debt owed for sin (as God, he is able) and *able to meet justice* by paying the debt as a human (the debt belongs to humans). Other Christian thinkers will emphasize Christ's role here as a **substitute** for us, taking our place to pay the price of sin. Anselm says,

Christ of his own accord gave to his Father what he was never going to lose as a matter of necessity, and he paid, on behalf of sinners, a debt which he did not owe.... He was in no way needy on his own account, or subject to compulsion from others, to whom he owed nothing, unless it was punishment that he owed them. Nevertheless, he gave his life, so precious; no, his very self; he gave his

³⁰ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 283.

person—think of it—in all its greatness, in an act of his own, supremely great, volition.³¹

For Anselm, God’s salvation is both just and merciful. Justice is seen in the fact that God responds to sin with the punishment it deserves, mercy in God’s willingness to become human in order to pay sin’s just price.

Anselm’s **satisfaction** theory of the atonement and theories that focus on Jesus’s substitutionary sacrifice fit into the same conceptual space as their **forensic** cousins (which shift the metaphor from the feudal context to the court of law). Whatever the metaphor, the cross-center model is the dominant model of atonement in Western Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic. There is good reason for this, for the model has many strengths. These include (1) being p 161 based in the person of Jesus Christ, his humanity and divinity; (2) taking seriously the biblical witness about justification, including the legal or forensic metaphors of Scripture; (3) dealing seriously with the horror of sin, insisting that sin has consequences; (4) emphasizing the justice and faithfulness of God; and (5) dealing with the central place Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice on the cross takes in the biblical narrative.³² Drawbacks include (1) giving relatively less attention to the incarnation, life, and resurrection of Christ (in comparison to the cross); (2) tending to a soteriology focused on individuals, at the expense of the communal and cosmic aspects of salvation; and (3) focusing on justification at the expense of sanctification.

Moral Exemplar

The final model of atonement is linked with its famous proponent, Peter Abelard (1079–1142). Abelard talks about atonement in terms of the perfect love of Christ, which becomes a **moral example** for us who are witnesses of that love. Abelard suggests that in seeing the love of Christ, especially on the cross, we are moved by love to love in turn. Abelard thus envisions the remedy for sin as a moral trans-

³¹ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 349.

³² For an account of the centrality of the cross in connection to the many other aspects of the gospel, see Darrell L. Bock, *Recovering the Real Lost Gospel: Reclaiming the Gospel as Good News* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010).

formation. If taken alone, this moral exemplar view is the weakest of our models. It has too much in common with the Pelagian heresy and moralism to serve as a true basis for reconciliation between humanity and God. If wed to one of the other atonement models, one that interprets the human situation as standing in need of Jesus, not just as an example but as the powerful savior, then this emphasis on being transformed by Christ's love can take its place in the practice of soteriology.