

THE EVOLUTION OF ATONEMENT THEORIES IN WESTERN
CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY: WHERE THEY HAVE BEEN
AND WHERE THEY ARE GOING

by

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ABSTRACT

There are three main ways of viewing the atonement that have dominated Western Christian Theology in the past: the classic view, the Latin view, and the subjective view. Each of these views were important in their time and place within history, but it is time that we begin to search for a new way of viewing the atonement in order for the gospel to remain a viable narrative for Christians to connect to in contemporary thought. I argue that the God must be nonviolent and that divine justice should follow a restorative versus a retributive model of justice. It is through these new understandings of God's character, agency, and justice that the atonement must be understood.

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INTRODUCTION

For centuries narrative has been an integral element in constructing and understanding human history. Stories help people understand their history and connect to something greater than themselves. History itself is the accumulation of narratives that can be retold and certainly reinterpreted. People desire to cling to something they can connect and relate to. Myth or narrative provides this. Narrative not only communicates referential truth, or facts. The ways in which a story is told and interpreted completely shape its meaning and significance. This is especially true in the case of religion.

One of the fundamental reasons religions have developed and continue to thrive is because of the deep, human connection to narrative. In order to understand the purpose, calling, or significance in this life, people desire to connect to something that is greater than themselves. People are drawn to religion because it provides them with a larger narrative that they can be a part of. Religious history is integral in understanding the ways in which followers live out their particular faith each day. As time continues to move forward and the stories are retold, they are constantly being reinterpreted in order to remain relevant.

Each of us is significantly shaped and formed by his particular time and place. Additionally we are also constantly shaping our time and place. One cannot escape the effects that society and culture have on the way we see the world. Time and place play a major role in the ways in which we tell and interpret narrative. It is for this reason we must continue to put the narratives we know within our own frame of reference. The Christian faith, like any other religion, is formed and shaped by the

accumulation of significant narratives. The cornerstone of all forms of Christianity is the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The different ways in which this story has been told and interpreted are innumerable. There have, however, been certain significant interpretations of the Gospel that have dominated Christian thought, each shaped significantly by the values and beliefs of each and every culture at the time of its interpretation. The ways in which the Gospel has been interpreted cannot be separated from the time and place such interpretation occurred. The interpreters were a product of their society and culture and therefore were telling the story of the Gospel through a particular lens or framework.

It is for this reason that we must continue to interpret this story within our own, contemporary worldview. In order for Christianity to continue to thrive, people must be able to connect and relate to its cornerstone. What was once a perfectly acceptable interpretation of the Gospel may not always remain so. It is important to be able to rethink this story in order to ensure its cultural relevance within a contemporary framework. A fresh perspective on the Gospel will allow Christianity to not only thrive, but also grow and potentially allow newer generations to connect to its central narrative. It is time for us to move away from the traditional violent and punitive models of atonement doctrine that have dominated Western Christian thought, and begin to conceive of the atoning work of Jesus as a nonviolent and restorative act of God's divine love and justice.

HISTORY

The ways in which the gospel has been conceived of in the past help us gain perspective on the ways in which time and place influence thought, and therefore

doctrine. It is also helpful for us to understand the previous models of the atonement in order to critique them, find areas that are problematic within a contemporary framework, and decide the ways in which modern atonement doctrine must grow. In his book *Christus Victor*, Gustav Aulén studies the three dominant ways in which the atonement has been viewed through the history of the Christian church. He carefully lays out the three main waves of thought surrounding atonement doctrine as: the dramatic or classic view, the Latin or objective view, and the subjective or humanistic view. He also traces each view back to its founders and prominent proponents.

Classic View

The first and earliest doctrine reflects the dramatic or classic view of the atonement. Aulén attributes the formation of this view to its most prominent founder, the early Christian theologian, Irenaeus. It is in the work of Irenaeus that the classic view of the atonement can be found in its fullest form. As a starting point, Aulén points out Irenaeus' heavy emphasis on the incarnation. Indeed, Aulén claims that the incarnation is "the cornerstone of Irenaeus' theology . . . the Incarnation is the necessary preliminary to the atoning work, because only God is able to overcome the powers which hold man¹ in bondage, and man is helpless" (20). In the classic doctrine, the incarnation, that is, God incarnate, is a crucial beginning. Jesus must be fully divine in order to atone. It is also important here to note here that Irenaeus believes that humans are held in bondage to powers greater than them and that only God can rescue them from said powers. These powers are understood to

¹ I will preserve the author's use of gender-specific terminology when using quotations.

be the evil forces of the world such as sin and the Devil. On the subject of sin, Aulén points out that Irenaeus, “think[s] of sin as affecting the whole man” in two ways: it is both “an objective power, under which men are in bondage and not able to set themselves free,” but also, “it is something voluntary and willful” (23). This is a crucial point. Because of humanity’s willful choice to sin, it “makes men debtors in relation to God” and it is because of this debt, “There is, then, enmity between mankind and God, an enmity which can only be taken away through an Atonement” (23-24). Humanity’s willful choice to sin has deeply offended God. The atonement, then, is necessary to pay a debt owed to God by sinful humankind.

The choice to sin, however, is not the only reason humankind was in need of a savior, according to Irenaeus. Humanity must also be saved from the work of the Devil. Aulén points out that Irenaeus “thinks of the devil as having in some sense an objective existence, independent of sin and death. He is the lord of sin and death” (26). Humans must not only be saved from their own sin, they must also be saved from the powers of bondage held over them by this undefeatable enemy: the devil. Here is a point of the classic view that can be seen as problematic in a contemporary framework. Arguing that the devil might have an objective existence would be a much more difficult sell, so to speak, in contemporary doctrine. For early church doctrine, however, it was an important point in understanding the depth of humankind’s need of rescuing. Aulén points out that Irenaeus has two different ways of viewing God’s righteous act of redemption. In the first way, “the devil cannot be allowed to have any rights over men; he is a robber, a rebel . . . unjustly laying hands on that which does not belong to him. Therefore it is no more than

justice that he should be defeated and driven out” (27). At the same time, however, Irenaeus highlights the righteousness of God’s work by “showing that in it He does not use mere external compulsion, mere brute force, but acts altogether according to justice” (28). In understanding God’s justice in this view, the role of the devil is important. Irenaeus points out that the devil is not the only guilty party involved. Aulén claims that Irenaeus believed “man after all is guilty; man has sold himself to the devil . . . Christ gave Himself as a ransom paid to the devil for man’s deliverance” (28). According to the classic view, humans are guilty of serving the devil, the lord of sin and death instead of God, the Lord of righteousness and life, and therefore deserve to be subject to the devil’s power. Aulén claims that, “To call this a juridical doctrine of Atonement is nonsense. Irenaeus’ real meaning would be more truly expressed by saying that God observes ‘the rules of fair play’” (28). Aulén claims that Irenaeus stands firm in his belief that God is fully just and fair. If humans are subject to the powers of the devil, it is because they placed themselves there. The devil may have played a role in tricking, or deceiving humankind, but ultimately humans are at fault for choosing to sin.

At this point in the classic narrative, humankind has dug itself a hole too deep to climb out of on its own. This is where the necessary atoning work of Christ must come into play. Aulén claims that Irenaeus is unique among the other theological fathers that will follow him because he puts a heavy emphasis on not only the death and resurrection of Christ, but also on his life. This is an important element in analyzing Irenaeus’ view of the Atonement. Aulén believes, “It is remarkable what great weight [Irenaeus] attaches to the Obedience of Christ throughout His life on

earth. He shows how the disobedience of the one man, which inaugurated the reign of sin, is answered by the One Man who brought life. By his obedience Christ ‘recapitulated’ and annulled the disobedience” (29). In the end it is his obedience that breeds his triumph. Throughout his entire life, he continues to be the victor in the temptation he faces, in his preaching, and in his teaching. Through his perfect obedience, he *recapitulates* the life that the first man, Adam, should have lived had he not fallen into sin. It is this *redoing* of life that earns back the favor of God on behalf of humankind when satisfaction is completed in Christ’s death. Aulén does note, however, “it is His death that is the final and decisive battle” (30). The atonement is fully completed in death, because as Aulén points out, Irenaeus has a specific tendency to refer to the atoning work as a ransom paid to the powers of evil: sin, death, or the devil. The ransom paid for freedom is the death of the perfect son. Once the ransom has been paid, these powers over humankind are overthrown and no longer rule.

Once the ransom has been paid, a new relationship between God and humankind is formed. Aulén points out that the divine victory that was accomplished in the work of Christ “forms the central element in the *recapitulatio*, the restoring and the perfecting of the creation” (21). The result of the atonement is our reconciliation to God. The relationship between God and humankind that was broken with the fall is restored. God has reconciled us to himself through his Atoning work in Jesus Christ. It is important to note:

At this central point, God is both the Reconciler and the Reconciled. It is God who, as active, accomplishes the work of salvation; but at the same time He is

also, as passive, reconciled, because the bondage of helplessness under the powers of evil, from which He delivers man, is also, from another point of view, an enmity involving man's guilt. (31)

God is both the active and the passive agent, reconciling humankind to Himself and being reconciled to us. No power other than God, himself, could reconcile us to God. This is why the incarnation is so crucial to the classic view. It is only God that has the power to atone; therefore it must be God that enters into a fallen world, embodying a human, to make a sacrifice on our behalf. God is the full agent of atonement in the classic view.

Aulén praises the teaching of Irenaeus as a thorough model outline for the Classic view of the Atonement. Incarnation and Atonement are so closely connected in the classic view that they are considered inseparable. Aulén points out that it is "God's Love, the Divine *agape*, that removes the sentence that rested upon mankind, and creates a new relation . . . which is altogether different from any sort of justification by legal righteousness. The whole dispensation is the work of grace" (34). It is once again important to highlight our powerlessness to offer God anything or to reconcile or atone for ourselves. It is by His grace and grace alone that God reconciles himself to mankind in the classic view.

Latin View

The next prominent view that begins to emerge in church history is the Latin or objective view, which reaches its fullest form in the Middle Ages. Aulén notes that Irenaeus' core ideas remain prevalent in the teachings of the later fathers. He points out that, "We shall be constantly meeting the same general teaching, under various

forms of expression,” each variation promoting their own interests (35). Aulén believes “Tertullian prepares the building materials; Cyprian begins to construct out of them a doctrine of the Atonement” and then “its full and clear formulation [is found] in the great work of Anselm [of Canterbury]” (81), (38). Aulén begins with Tertullian, in whom “we find the fundamental conceptions of *satisfaction* and *merit*: both words apply to penance. Satisfaction is the compensation which a man makes for his fault” (81). Aulén further explains that:

Penance is satisfaction, the acceptance of a temporal penalty to escape eternal loss. The idea of Merit is associated with the performance of that which is commanded, the observance of Law; and if such observance in general is ‘meritorious,’ in its special sense the term is applied to acts which are ‘supererogatoria,’ going beyond what is strictly of obligation . . . It is possible, therefore, for men to earn an overplus of merit. (81-82)

These two concepts of satisfaction and merit are important pieces of the foundation of the Latin theory, as we will see when turning to Cyprian.

Tertullian is responsible for bringing these two concepts to the forefront, while it is Cyprian who takes them one step further. Aulén points out that “The idea of such superfluous merit can be transferred from one person to another is not found in Tertullian; but it comes in Cyprian . . . [who] begins to apply the principle to the overplus of merit earned by Christ, and to interpret His work as a satisfaction” (82). It is with this assertion that we can see the beginning of the formation of the Latin view of the Atonement. This perspective, “of a legal relationship between two parties, is now used to interpret the work of Christ; by His passion and death He

earns an excess of merit, and this is paid to God as satisfaction or compensation” (82). It is with this that we can see a clear distinction between the Classic view and the Latin view. Recalling that in the Classic view man is powerless, and it is God that is both the active and passive agent in the work of reconciliation, the Latin view paints a different picture of the agency involved in the atoning work of Christ. Aulén highlights that the Latin view’s “root idea is that man must make an offering or payment to satisfy God’s justice” (82). We are no longer powerless or passive, but we must, in fact, pay a debt owed to God. Aulén points out two main points that emerge in the Latin view: “First, that the whole idea is essentially legalistic; and second, that, in speaking of Christ’s work, the emphasis is all laid on that which is done by Christ *as man* in relation to God” (83). It is with the tools provided by Tertullian and Cyprian that Anselm of Canterbury is able to build and develop a full form of the Latin view of the Atonement.

This fully developed theory is found in *Cur Deus homo?* by Anselm, translated as, *Why God Became Man*. Aulén points out that he “emphasizes especially the idea of Law as the foundation on which the doctrine of Atonement must be built” (84). Aulén is careful to point out that the study and interpretation of the work of Anselm is quite controversial. Aulén points out that the “essential structure of Anselm’s thought . . . is built on the basis of the penitential system” (86). Aulén clearly states Anselm’s argument as such: “Men are not able to make the necessary satisfaction, because they are all sinful. If men cannot do it, then God must do it. But, on the other hand, the satisfaction must be made by man, because man is guilty. The only solution is that God becomes man; this is the answer to the question *Cur Deus*

homo?" (86). Remaining consistent with the punitive structure of the Anselm's thought, it is humankind that has committed the offense against God therefore it is man who must pay recompense for his offense. This is how Anselm characterizes the Atoning work of Christ. God must become human in order to offer up his penance on humankind's behalf.

It is in the connection between the Incarnation and Atonement that a subtle but distinct difference can be found in the Classic and Latin views. In the Classic, the connection is organic and essential, even inseparable. There the connection was straightforward: God enters into the sinful world to overcome the powers of sin and death, Himself completing the atoning work for which nothing but Divine nature was adequate to complete. For Anselm, however, in requiring a human to accomplish this work, "the central problem is: Where can a man be found, free from sin and guilt, and able to offer himself as an acceptable sacrifice to God?" (87). This question is not answered as simply as in the Classic view of the Atonement. He must turn to secondary lines of thought in order to prove the necessity of the incarnation. One of these arguments is "that the union of the Divine nature with the human nature in Christ confers on His work a greater value than it would otherwise have" (87). Another argument is that "it would conflict with the dignity of man if the satisfaction were made by an angel or by one who was merely human" (87). Aulén points out the significance of Anselm's emphasis on the dignity of humankind. He also highlights that for Anselm, the doctrine of the Incarnation is less of a reality than it was to the original church Fathers. To Anselm, it is a fixed dogma that does not fit well in the new environment he has created.

It is in this that the most distinct differentiations can be drawn between the two views presented thus far. The Fathers “show how God became incarnate that He might redeem; [Anselm] teaches a human work of satisfaction, accomplished by Christ” (88). Once again, it can be seen that the Latin view puts a much greater emphasis on the role and significance of humankind, in which humankind is an active agent. Aulén claims that Anselm:

Is anxious to insist that the voluntary offering up of self even to death is the greatest sacrifice and the highest gift that man can make to God . . . for when Anselm throws out the idea that Christ even pays satisfaction to His own Divine nature, he is saying, as clear as words can express, that he is thinking of that which Christ accomplishes as man, of an offering made to God from man’s side, from below. (88).

In order to pay the great debt owed to God by humankind, humans must be willing to make the greatest sacrifice, and it must come from them. Christ, in his perfect obedience and lack of sin, pays this legal debt owed to a just God on humankind’s behalf. Anselm maintains that it is still, in some sense, the work of God, because God “is the author of the plan, and He has sent His son and ordered it so that the required satisfaction shall be made. Nevertheless, it is not in the full sense God’s work of redemption” (88). The original fullness of the work of God in redemption found in the classic view has disappeared. Aulén comments that, “God is no longer regarded as *at once* the agent and the object of reconciliation, but as *partly* the agent, as being the author of the plan, and *partly* the object, when the plan comes to be carried out” (88). This marks a great shift in the way the Atonement has been

thought of thus far in church history. It rejects the full and active hand of God in redemption and gives the dignity of humankind much more emphasis.

Anselm also fervently rejects the traditional dualistic view held by Classic theorists and emphasizes the atonement as legal transfer reflecting his conception of the *just* nature of God. In the classic view, what had once been regarded as a great triumph, the climax of the drama after a long conflict with the powers of the Devil, is damped down. Aulén highlights that Anselm's "whole emphasis is on the death [of Christ] as an isolated fact" (89). This is an area that is problematic within the Latin view. It seems that whole gospel is under-appreciated. The greatest accomplishment is primarily found in death. Also in the Latin theory, "the order of law and justice is not allowed to be infringed; it is absolutely necessary that satisfaction be made by man to God's justice" (89). According to the Latin view, it is "*either* forgiveness of sins by God, which would mean that sin is not treated seriously and so would amount to a toleration of laxity, *or* satisfaction" (89). In order to be consistent with the just nature of God, satisfaction is the only option. The alternative would be a weak, unjust God. This is, of course, relying upon Anselm's interpretation of God's justice. Aulén describes this as, "The vindication of the justice of God and His judgment on sin necessarily involves making good, compensation, which satisfies the demands of justice" (89). In Anselm's view, sin plays a hugely important role. It is his emphasis on the gravity of sin that "fastens the doctrine of Atonement into a juridical scheme" (90). The legal nature of Anselm's theory "is carried further, when he goes on to show how the merit earned by Christ becomes available for men" (90). Anselm's theory is rooted in justice, law, and rationality.

Aulén notes that in the Classic view, the atoning work of Christ reflects a Divine order, rather than a legal order, which is entirely different. In the Latin view, the Atonement is thought of in terms of the contemporary legal system based upon punitive justice. Aulén claims that the differences between the Classic and Latin views can be summed up as thus: “The classic idea shows a continuity in the Divine action and a discontinuity in the order of justice; the Latin type, a legal consistency and a discontinuity in Divine operation” (90). Furthermore, in the Latin view, Christ’s death is seen as a “‘non-personal’ transference of Christ’s merit to men . . . and also, that when he comes to speak of penance for sins committed after Baptism, Anselm, like other Latin theologians, allows that men can earn merit in God’s sight” (92). Aulén is clear about placing the Latin view within its historical context, emphasizing the fact that “the Latin doctrine of Atonement is closely related to the legalism characteristic of the mediaeval outlook” (92). The juridical nature of Anselm’s Latin view of the Atonement is distinctly a product of its time and place. In the mediaeval outlook, this system of law and rationality and punitive justice would have been widely accepted and praised. This goes to show that Atonement doctrines need to be rethought in order to be consistent with their historical and cultural contexts.

Subjective View

The third main theory of the Atonement is known as the Subjective, or humanistic view. As seen in the two theories that came before it, the subjective view is a product of its time and place within history and culture. Aulén is clear to point out that the subjective view was born out of the age of the Enlightenment. Aulén

claims that “the assault of the Enlightenment on the Orthodox theology concentrated itself on the doctrine of the Atonement . . . [because] the theologians of the Enlightenment had no respect for the church authority which the doctrine enjoyed” (133). Aulén argues that the movements towards the subjective view begin with Pietism, whose writers “often show a preference for the imagery, such as Christ the Physician of the soul, over the legal language of the Orthodox doctrine” (134). Pietism begins to move away from the traditional views that included legal language and thought, and begin a new way of thinking about the Atonement. One of the most significant shifts in thought and language “was that the watchword of Pietism was New Birth . . . rather than Justification – that is to say, the word chosen was one that described a subjective process” (134). It consists of an internal shift of attitude or consciousness that makes one new. With Pietism, the idea of the Atonement begins to move away from the traditional, external act of being justified, into a more internal conception of being “reborn.” This would have been a significant shift in the way the atonement was conceived of. This also creates a shift from the communal ideology of an objective agent acting to atone for all of humanity, towards a more individualistic framework of each person experiencing a new birth within oneself.

This shift away from the justification and satisfaction found in “orthodox” doctrine of the atonement continues to gain speed. The Enlightenment forces theologians to re-conceptualize traditional doctrines in dramatic ways. Aulén claims that “All the bases of the Orthodox theory were challenged” and “A ‘more human’ idea of the Atonement was propounded, to replace the accepted ‘juridical’ treatment” (134). Another significant shift took place in that, “these theologians

desired to uproot the 'anthropomorphic' features . . . from the conception of God" (134). The theologians developing the subjective view believed that the basis of the Orthodox view of the Atonement was "inconsistent with the 'simple teaching' of Jesus, and the love of the Heavenly Father. It was therefore intolerable that God should be thought of as needing to be 'propitiated' through a satisfaction offered to Him" (134). Rather than clinging to the orthodox conception of God as more anthropomorphic, the subjective theologians begin to view God in a new way. With a major shift in the doctrine of God comes a significant shift in the doctrine of the atonement.

This shift in thought in regards to the character of God has a dramatic impact on the theory of the Atonement. Aulén points out, "It was an axiom of the enlightenment that God's attitude to the world must, always and unalterably, be one of benevolence and goodwill; such language was preferred to the word Love" (134). This shift in the doctrine of God renders the necessity of the atonement virtually null and void. If God's attitude towards humanity is unfalteringly benevolent, then there is really no need for the atonement. If the relationship between God and humanity has not been severed in some way, then there is nothing for Christ to restore. Aulén states this issue as such:

Therefore, so far as God was concerned, no Atonement was needed. . . side by side with this emphasis on God's unchanging goodwill, the idea appears of a certain influence exerted upon God from man's side. Man repents and amends his life, and God in turn responds by rewarding man's amendment

with an increase of happiness. The ruling idea is therefore essentially anthropocentric and moralistic. (135).

In this view, the idea of sin is weakened, and God's "love" actually points towards leniency. The god of the subjective view seems almost unjust in how little the sins of humankind and undeniable evil in the world play a part in the cosmos. This depiction of the character of God is weak and unjust, and therefore is not a viable conception for contemporary thought and doctrine.

Aulén claims that the theology of the Enlightenment thinkers began to deepen with the turn of the Nineteenth century, particularly with Friedrich Schleiermacher. First, Schleiermacher begins to distinguish between salvation and atonement in a different way than seen in the previous theories. In Schleiermacher's subjective view, "Salvation takes the primary place; it is effected as the individual's sense of God grows stronger. Atonement, reconciliation, is the sense of blessedness, which follows on a deepened consciousness of God" (136). It is important to note that in Schleiermacher's view of salvation and atonement, it is an internal, subjective act within the individual. It all occurs within us, which is radically different than the previous views in which salvation and atonement occur as external acts into which we are invited. With this in mind Aulén points out, "Schleiermacher says quite plainly that the change in the spiritual life which comes to pass as the soul's consciousness of God is deepened, is the real meaning of that which is called atonement" (136). Schleiermacher's influence deepens the subjective view and propels its prominence. His interpretation of the Atonement is entirely internal, as an achievement or experience happening within each human, as opposed to the

external work of God in Christ. Aulén claims that “Schleiermacher . . . interprets salvation primarily as a . . . moral uplift; Atonement, or Reconciliation, becomes essentially a sense of being at home in the cosmos, gained through . . . a new attitude to life, characterized by harmony with the universe” (137). As Aulén points out, this view of the Atonement could almost be seen as humankind being reconciled with its situation and its environment, rather than to God as a just, outside being with whom humankind is at odds.

This shift in conceptions of atonement and salvation is a reflection of the transition from a dualistic view of the cosmos to the monistic view that dominates the subjective model. Because there is no longer an idea of humankind being separate and at odds with God:

God is not regarded as having any direct relation to the process of man’s reconciliation, except in so far as He is the ultimate sanction of man’s sense of ‘absolute dependence.’ When all is governed by universal causality, there is no room for an alienation between God and man. No such alienation can be believed to exist. (137)

The absence of dualism and the need for reconciliation begs the question, what then, are we to make of Christ? Aulén claims, “the prevailing idea is that Christ is treated as the Head of the human race, and that God’s attitude to mankind is influenced by the fact that He sees mankind in the light which radiates from Christ” (138). Christ is the moral figurehead through which all of humankind should aspire to emulate. Aulén criticizes the subjective view and reveals his favoritism of the classical view when he states:

[The subjective view's] weakness is that the forgiving and atoning work of God is *made dependent upon* the ethical effects in human lives; consequently, the Divine Love is not clearly set forth as free, spontaneous love. Wherever there is such a view of Divine Love, as not called forth by the worthiness or goodness of men, but as bestowing value on men by the very fact that they are loved by God, the work of Divine forgiveness always appears as prior to ethical regeneration, not dependent upon . . . human repentance or any other conditions on man's side. (140)

The subjective view creates a conception of a relatively weak and powerless God. Its anthropocentric nature puts the power and responsibility of morality and salvation within the hands of flawed humans.

Each view of the atonement that has dominated Western Christian thought has reflected the conceptual needs of its time. Atonement doctrine has been continuously rethought and reshaped so that it may be accepted in its contemporary context. In the early church, the full agency of God in providing reconciliation was crucial in understanding the work of Christ. Jesus is God incarnate. His life is a recapitulation of the life of fallen humankind. His perfect obedience allows him to be offered as a perfect sacrifice that, in death, frees us from bondage to the devil, sin, and death. His death is a ransom paid and the victory that sets us free and restores us to right relationship with the Father. In the Latin view, the agency begins to shift. God became man so that we could make a sacrifice to God in order to satisfy the needs of God's justice. Jesus is the perfect representative of humankind to God. In death, the retributive nature of God's justice is satisfied, and the relationship

between God and humankind is restored. In the subjective view, the shift from dualism to monism virtually removes the agency of God and places it entirely within the individual consciousness. Jesus becomes the moral figurehead, without much agency or power in atonement and salvation.

In order to move forward, it is important to first acknowledge the value and validity of each of these views during the time of their dominance. They were each uniquely valuable in allowing Christians to connect to the protagonist of the story that defined their belief system. These models of atonement doctrine were meaningful and effective in the past, but we must recognize that they were constructed for the distinct values of the past. It is time to acknowledge the needs of our own time and explore how we might make the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus a *living idea* today. Theology is more than a set of concepts that fit together to form an acceptable argument. Theology is the reflection of the *real* life and death beliefs of its living practitioners. It is because of this that doctrine never has been and never will be static. If we are to truly connect to this belief system, then we must continue to question, reevaluate, and rethink conceptions of the atonement.

A NONVIOLENT GOD

A major issue that has arisen in contemporary conversations on the atonement is the topic of violence. With our world torn apart by war, with international and domestic terrorism flooding our television screens and newspapers, and with violence flooding the entertainment industry and media, our religion must reflect the hope of something set apart and distinct from our everyday lives. If the stories that define our faith are no different than the stories that flood

our world, we have no reason to seek refuge in the transcendent. It may seem that the story of the death of Jesus is inherently violent, and cannot truly be thought of as otherwise. However, if this is the case, what are we to make of God? If God is the ideal being - perfect, powerful, good, and full of steadfast love - how then, are we to interpret this violent act that is at the center of Christian theology? Are we to accept a conception of a Divine Father that demands the murder of his beloved son to satisfy a debt that humanity owed to Him? When thinking of what a fresh perspective of the atonement might need to remain culturally relevant today, the removal of violent theology stands at the forefront.

To begin to achieve this, we must start with what we believe about the character of God. First, God is sovereign, omniscient, and omnipotent. Nothing that happens or that has happened in this world was outside of His complete knowledge and control. Second, God is good and just. He is the perfect example of ultimate fair and righteous authority. Third and finally, God is perfect love. The character of God is crucial to how we think about the atonement, because God is the beginning and end of human and life and existence. Therefore, His character must be the anchor that remains constant and that we build upon. Another aspect of God that is integral to the atonement is the Orthodox Christian theological concept of the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all of the same substance: one God. They are separate only in their distinct forms, but are otherwise inseparable. It is important to note that the *same* God is found in all three forms, because we are distinctly shown the character of the Father through the life of the Son. Jesus is the embodiment of God's character. In beginning to think about nonviolent theology, the

primary question is well-stated by J. Denny Weaver in his essay, “The Nonviolent Atonement: Human Violence, Discipleship, and God.” In this essay, he argues that “Ultimately atonement theology is actually a discussion of our image of God – one who defeats violence with superior violence and reconciles sin on the basis of a violent death, or a God who triumphs over evil and reconciles sinners nonviolently through resurrection” (340). The latter image is what we must cling to in order to move forward with a new understanding of the atonement and create a gospel that is culturally relevant today.

There are several contemporary nonviolent theologians who have also identified this issue and spoken on the ways in which we can begin to rethink the atonement in light of this increasing awareness. In his essay, “Narrative *Christus Victor*: The Answer to Anselmian Atonement Violence,” J. Denny Weaver problematizes the existing three models of atonement theory. He raises the question of blame when he asks, “Who ultimately killed Jesus?” (5). He ascertains that in the ransom view, it is apparent that the Devil killed Jesus. However, “God the Father looks particularly bad in the ransom version – handing the Son over for death as a ransom payment to purchase freedom for God’s other children, or as a debt payment to Satan, who possesses rights in a contractual arrangement with God” (5). In the ransom version, God plays a distinctly violent role, directly handing over the Son as a sacrifice. This conveys an image of a father that is particularly detached and emotionally removed from the Son on Earth, engaging in making an egregious deal with malevolent powers. It is an image of God that is bargaining with the devil and decides the violent death of his Son is the only answer for atonement with humanity.

If God owes the Devil some sort of ransom, it appears as though the Devil possesses somewhat equal knowledge and authority as God. However, God does not appear much better in the satisfaction theory in which a debt is owed to God's honor, which has been offended by human sin. In this version, "God's honor not only needs the death, God also arranges for Jesus to die to pay the debt to God's honor" (5). This view is clearly unacceptable for a nonviolent doctrine of atonement. Ultimately, Weaver concludes that "classic atonement doctrines . . . portray an image of God as either divine avenger or punisher and/or child abuser, a Father who arranges the death of one child for the benefit of the others . . . It reveals an atonement motif in which divinely required and sanctioned violence is the basis of Jesus' saving work" (7). Weaver moves on to say that the ideas that have dominated atonement doctrine are unacceptable foundations even to build upon or be rethought. He claims:

Satisfaction atonement in any of its forms pictures God as a God whose modus operandi is retributive violence and it presents an image of Jesus that models passive, innocent submission to abuse and oppression. This image of God, this image of atonement, and this image of being a Christian in the world should be abandoned. (16)

Weaver lays out a strong argument in his critique of how the classic atonement doctrines are lacking, particularly in how they portray a characterization of a violent God that is an unacceptable conceptualization of his character. We can take from Weaver, the deconstructions of the classic views as he exposes the violent characteristics of this conceptualization of God and the questions he raises that

must be answered adequately: who is responsible for the death of Christ, and for what purpose?

It will not be helpful to entirely discard the old models of atonement doctrines, because they can be utilized as a foundation to build upon. I agree with Gustav Aulén that the most viable view to work from is the Classic view that can be found in the work of Irenaeus, and was dominant in the early church. I do believe it should be reshaped away from the idea of a ransom being paid to the devil for man's freedom, as this is not only a dated view because of the concept of the devil is an objective power operating against humans and God, but it is also dated in that it is inherently violent for God to need to hand over his son so that he might die at the hands of the devil. Therefore we must move away from the ransom language of the classic view; however there are elements of this model that will be helpful to employ in reshaping atonement doctrine, which we will see as we move forward. When thinking of what a fresh perspective on the atonement needs, it is important to look at the gospel in full scope. That is: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The classic atonement doctrines seem to fail in that there is a heavy emphasis placed primarily on the death of Jesus as the act of atonement, when in fact, there is much more to consider.

In the classic view, a heavy emphasis is placed on the incarnation in the life of Jesus. This is an element that should be maintained in contemporary doctrine. The atonement should employ all aspects of the gospel, not be centered on just one. In his essay, "*Christus Victor* as Nonviolent Atonement," Thomas Finger lays out a thorough and viable way of viewing nonviolent atonement theory. He finds value in

the classic doctrine, pointing out that “Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection each are essential, for they are acts in a drama” (95). He also maintains Irenaeus’ concept of *recapitulation*. As Finger points out, through this theory, Jesus lives the life originally set out for Adam and Eve. Jesus, through perfect obedience to the Father, resists temptation and does not fall to the evil and malevolent forces of the world (95). In this way, his life is a crucial element of the process of atonement. His obedience overturns humanity’s disobedience.

In addition, the perfection that characterizes Jesus’ life reveals the character of God to humanity. Because of Jesus’ divine nature, he is the embodiment of God’s character. Therefore, through his teaching, life, and work, it becomes clear that the character of God is a loving, suffering servant. As Finger states:

A struggle with Demonic forces frames the synoptic Gospels. It centers on how Jesus would exercise his messianic role; on *precisely how* he would bring atonement, and therefore, on what atonement actually is. The messiah was most often expected to be a warrior who would conquer Rome militarily. Immediately after Jesus’ baptism . . . Satan tempted him in the wilderness to exercise [his] calling in ways that would befit a glorious warrior. But Jesus resisted, adopting instead the suffering servant pattern. (96).

His life is an instrumental element of the atonement. His obedience is crucial on a spiritual level, while his life and teaching are important on an earthly level. In his divinity, his life is a *recapitulation* and a revelation of the character of God as the suffering servant. In his humanity, his life is a model of what we should aspire to be: a flawless existence as a model human. It is important to note that his life is *both* of

these. The subjective view acknowledges Jesus as an example, but the problem with this view is that he is seen as *only* an example, while his divinity hardly plays a role. In keeping with Orthodox Christian thought, he is fully man and fully God and each serves a purpose in his atoning work: his divinity working towards atonement on cosmic level and his humanity revealing the character of God that we should aspire to model after.

In order to form a fully developed idea of atonement doctrine, the monistic philosophy of the subjective view must be rejected, and a dualistic philosophy maintained. God, in his holy perfection, is set apart from sinful humanity and the evil and malevolent powers of the world. The world is deeply broken by sin. As Iranaeus believes, man is at once held in bondage by sin and willingly submitting to it. It is important to emphasize man's choice to sin. Finger argues that God *indirectly* exercises justice by handing sinners over to the "lords" they choose. He believes "God's final judgment does not so much inflict something as abandon us to the death we choose . . . This kind of justice is nonviolent. Violence is coercive and deprives its victims of freedom. This justice respects our freedom and lets us follow the course we choose" (98). The powers of sin and death are separate from the goodness and life found in the character of God. God shows humanity the ultimate expression of love and grace by entering into our world, ruled by the powers of evil, with the full knowledge of the inevitable ending. In addressing Weaver's question of who ultimately killed Jesus, a nonviolent atonement doctrine cannot conclude the answer to be God. Instead, Finger offers the idea that Jesus' death penalty is executed *directly* by the powers ruling our world. He claims that, "Jesus bore *their* wrath, *not*

the Father's, *directly*" (98). This is the necessary and inevitable ending when God, as the suffering servant, enters into a world of sin and death.

Final judgment, then, is abandonment to the other "lords" sinners choose and ultimately, abandonment to death. As Finger points out, this "Separates sinners from life's source [and] Jesus experienced that final abandonment to death and hell awaiting all who abandon God. His final cry, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt. 27:45-50) hardly makes sense otherwise" (98). Here is where other feminist and nonviolent theologians find the idea of cosmic child abuse, and why the theological concept of the Trinity is so important to maintain. If it is believed that Father and Son are divided as separate powers or beings with the Father sending the Son to the cross, then it is easy to see how the issue of cosmic child abuse is raised. However, if God is one – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – then all three are working cooperatively, as God, to reconcile humanity to himself. Jesus was obedient all the way to the cross, and yet it was entirely voluntary, as God. It is crucial to maintain that the love of God, as revealed through Jesus and the biblical narratives, is sacrificial and self-giving. So it is inevitable that when someone embodying this kind of love enters into a world of violence and death, that this person would suffer. As Finger describes it:

Indeed, if this territory were ultimately ruled by death, whose deepest impulse is to destroy the life from which that love flows, death would eventually attack that person. If he kept on living by self-giving, nonviolent love, death's antithesis, that person would finally be killed. (This is why Jesus

'had to die'; because God's love operates this way in the face of evil, not because some general, abstract law demands it). (99)

The father is not opposed to or set apart from the Son on this journey. It is a journey they take in cooperation as God, at odds with the malevolent forces at work in the world, to reconcile man to himself.

With this argument at the foreground of contemporary belief, we are able to hold on to the classic view's belief in God as the sovereign active agent, both the Reconciler and the Reconciled, but abandon the idea of the atonement as a ransom paid, which is not viable imagery or language for contemporary theology. The story of the gospel portrays atoning work that is a sacrificial, grace-filled mission to revert our violent systems by defeating death itself and revealing love and grace to humanity through restoration. Within Finger's work, we can take a viable understanding of the life of Jesus and how he enters into our world as God and that humans are the sinful, evil forces that put him to death. We are, however, left wondering what exactly the death of Jesus accomplishes, then. In order to understand why Jesus died (and in such a violent and unjust way), we must begin to consider the ways in which we are to conceive of the just nature of God. The answer to this next question cannot be because God needed satisfaction in order to fulfill some skewed notion of cosmic *fair play*.

GOD'S JUSTICE

Religion and theology are often primarily constructed out of our pre-existing paradigms. We see the world through a specific framework that we hardly even know is constantly shaping our beliefs and outlooks on the world around us, let

alone how it shapes our conceptions of the divine. We can never truly separate ourselves from our time and place. It can be difficult to break away from what is familiar because that is what we know to be unquestionably true. Therefore, when we begin to conceive of the just nature of God, that is, how he brings about justice in the face of humanity's sin and *injustice*, it can be easy to fall into the trap of only conceiving the divine through the paradigms we know and are comfortable with. When thinking through the mechanics of the atonement, we must have a solid foundation for what we understand to be the just nature of God.

The justice system that dominates most ideology and developed societal structures is primarily punitive and retributive. In other words, in order to make a wrongdoing right, there must be some form of punishment that will cancel out the wrong, or at least "call it even," so to speak. Throughout most of human history, this has been the only idea of justice that seems to make sense and is considered to be fair. If an offense is committed, then those in power make a judgment on a suitable punishment. Crime and sin cannot be condoned or left unpunished; this would be considered unjust. Therefore, it is natural that atonement doctrines have historically followed the model of retributive justice. If we have always considered this model to be what is most just, then in order for our conceptions of God to be just, he must also follow this model of justice. Why should he not? This, however, is theology shaped and limited by our preexisting ideologies. Beginning again with the image of God, why should we trust a God that is no different or set apart from the fallen world we are surrounded by? Should we not strive for an understanding of God that is actually much different, and therefore set apart from the brokenness of systems that govern

the lives of humanity? If we actually consider it, what connects us to the idea of the divine is the *hope* of something greater than what we see. The justice that God brings through the gospel has to represent a better story that surpasses and *transcends* our punitive concepts. It needs to go beyond punishment and provide restoration.

We must begin to rethink the model of justice that God employs. In his book, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment*, Christopher D. Marshall argues that the teaching of the New Testament is compatible with the model of “restorative justice.” He claims:

Several criminal-justice experts advocate restorative justice as a viable alternative to the increasingly dysfunctional Western system of criminal justice, which is based largely on the concept of retribution. Unlike retributive justice, which centers on the notions of law-breaking, guilt, and punishment, restorative justice focuses on relationships, reconciliation, and reparation of harm done. (2)

Marshall believes in the idea of restorative justice as a model for how to view the just nature of God, as seen in the New Testament. In *Healing the Gospel: A Radical Vision for Grace, Justice, and the Cross*, Derek Flood sees the same issues with retributive justice and argues that it is not only an outdated model of justice, but that it is actually a harmful view. He believes that crime stems from a lack of empathy, and simply punishing people in no way helps solve this problem. He claims:

People do not learn empathy by being shamed and dehumanized. On the contrary, developing empathy has a lot to do with a healthy sense of self-worth. So while we may feel an impulse to want to punish and hurt those who have hurt us, this does not mend the hurt, it simply perpetuates it. In other words, punishment and shame are not the solution, they are a part of the problem. Punitive justice does not make things better, it makes them worse. (6)

Most of Western atonement theologies have followed the model of retributive justice. The retributive model is outdated, inconsistent with the New Testament teaching, and incompatible with the character of God. A fresh perspective on the atonement must offer something different. The atonement is about restoring harmony in humanity's relationship with God, not about punishment. It seems natural, then, for us to begin to view the atonement through the lens of restorative justice.

One of the most significant ways in which we can reshape concepts of justice and how wrongdoing is best dealt with, is through a deeper understanding of the nature of sin. In classic models that follow retributive justice, crime and sin are seen as the same. With retribution at the center of the atonement, sin is handled the same way as crime – punitively. In order to rethink the atonement, then, sin must be considered on its own, apart from crime. Marshall argues that, “[The New Testament writers] talk about sin and salvation more than crime and punishment, and while sin and crime are closely connected, they are not synonymous” (8). Equating sin to crime limits the ways in which we can think of sin as affecting humanity. The

distinction that Marshall points out, separating crime and sin, gives us the freedom to reinterpret it. Flood proposes that:

The guiding metaphor we need to adopt in order to understand the depths of our human brokenness and the scope of salvation in Christ is therefore one of sin as *sickness*, rather than sin as *crime*. That is, sin (hurtful behaviors) are merely a symptom of a much larger problem which requires healing rather than punishment. (19)

It is important to understand sin differently, because it dictates our understanding of how sin is dealt with. If sin is crime, it is viewed as needing punishment. However, if sin is sickness, then it must be viewed as needing healing.

Critics of this view argue that viewing sin as sickness takes away from the moral responsibility of man. Instead of viewing sin as affecting man in the two ways Irenaeus lays out, as both an objective power he is in bondage to and a voluntary choice of man to participate in, critics argue that if sin is sickness, then man has no moral responsibility in his sin. Flood answers these critics by claiming, "The fact that a problem is understood as 'sickness' in no way implies a disavowal of personal responsibility . . . How we live has a direct consequence on our health, and as a result preventative medicine involves making healthy lifestyle choices" (19). Flood does not suggest that humans are not at fault. He maintains that sin is a result of poor choices, but also that it is much more deeply rooted than simply behavioral patterns. It is his belief that "What such a medical paradigm does . . . indicate is that sin is not merely an outward act, but has deep consequences on our being, and that its causes are equally deep-rooted" (20). The medical metaphor offers a picture of

an issue that carries much more weight and depth than a legal metaphor. Flood argues that, “Because our wound is deep (to borrow the phrase from Augustine) we need to understand justification not merely as a legal declaration, but as an inner *transformation* making us healed and holy” (23). The medical metaphor acknowledges a kind of intense brokenness that would require powerful healing. If sin is simply crime and punishment, then it might be something we could possibly manage on our own; we have thorough methods of deciding just punishments for wrongdoings. If sin is a deeply rooted illness, however, then it requires a kind of healing we could never provide for ourselves. It makes God’s action a necessity.

If sin is sickness that requires healing, then a punitive model of justice simply cannot solve the problem. We must begin with a thorough understand of biblical, divine justice. In his book, Marshall extensively explores the writings of Paul to better explain why the model of restorative justice is the best understanding of divine justice. He begins with Paul’s understanding of righteousness, pointing out that, “It is crucial to recognize that Paul’s theology of justifying righteousness in Romans is constructed on Jewish rather than Greco-Roman presuppositions” (46). What this indicates is that Paul is drawing heavily from the scriptures to make his argument for the justice and righteousness of God. Marshall explains that the justice of the Old Testament is much more complex than can be put into one single definition. He explains that the two most commonly used definitions are translated as *mishpat* and *sedeq[ah]*. *Mishpat* is most commonly refers to legal settings and

decisions and typically refers to applied justice that is used in concrete situations to administer justice. However, Marshall explains:

Sedeq[ah], on the other hand, refers to justice in a more general or normative or objective sense. As the common translation ‘right-eousness’ implies, it refers to the ‘right order of things,’ to the correct ordering of the world according to the divine intention, and to actual conduct, both human and divine, that corresponds to the way things ought to be. (46)

The justice of the Old Testament is multi-faceted and works on levels that go beyond simple crime and punishment or the ethics of right and wrong. Biblical justice has implications deeply tied to *righteousness*, not simply legality.

The Old Testament concept of *righteousness* is crucial in understanding biblical, divine justice. Divine justice is motivated by righteousness. Marshall explains that, “the Hebrew idea of righteousness is *comprehensively relational* . . . Righteousness is, at heart, the fulfillment of the demands of a relationship, whether this relationship is with other human beings or with God” (47). All human actions, in some way, occur in relationship to another. We understand ourselves in relationship to our surrounding, and most profoundly in relationship to others, whether that is God or other humans. Disrupting righteousness is ultimately sinning against others and against God. Marshall further explains that:

To be righteous is to be faithful to the law of the covenant-keeping God and thus to treat fellow members of the covenant community with justice. To be unrighteous is to act in ways that break covenant. The central concern with biblical law was the creation of *shalom*, a state of soundness or ‘all-rightness’

within the community. The law provided a pattern for living in covenant, for living in *shalom*. Specific laws were considered to be just, not because they corresponded to some abstract ethical norm . . . but because they sustained *shalom* within the community. (48).

Because the laws were so heavily based on the restoration of the entire community, much of Old Testament legislation related to social justice: caring for the marginalized and oppressed. It is relational, covenantal justice. As Marshall claims, “Covenantal justice could be understood as positive succor for, and intervention on behalf of, the poor and oppressed . . . Covenant justice is satisfied by the restoration of *shalom*, not by the pain of punishment” (48, 49). He points out that God’s justice is, then, intervening on the behalf of the helpless.

Divine justice is intense, covenantal, powerful, and mobile. It is full of passion and activity. Marshall explains that in the Old Testament, Israel saw God *act* for them, on many occasions, to restore *shalom*. Because of the ways in which they saw God intervene on their behalf, Marshall claims that:

For Israel, then, the justice of God was not an abstract theological or philosophical axiom; it was something about God’s being learned from the concrete experience of God’s actions of claiming blessing, and rescuing Israel. Righteousness language in the Hebrew Bible is thus action language as well as relational language. (50)

The Divine justice depicted in the Old Testament is active and relational. It is not removed, objective, or passive. Marshall points out the distinction that, “The most common image for justice in the West is a set of scales, symbolizing the balancing of

rights and obligations or deeds and deserts. The prophetic symbol of justice is a mighty, surging river (Amos 5:24)” (53). Biblical justice is not static, waiting for a case to be presented and argued. Biblical justice is described as a surging river, full of power and life that moves and changes. Marshall believes that, “The justice of God is not primarily or normatively a retributive justice . . . but a restorative or reconstructive justice, a saving action by God that recreates *shalom* and makes things right” (53). Divine justice is far greater than can be found in the punitive model. God’s love for humanity in his righteous justice seeks not to punish, but to actively heal and restore what is sick and broken in our world.

It is crucial to understand the full scope of Divine justice in order to grasp the purpose of the gospel. God did not enter into our world of evil and suffering to bring more in the form of punishment. He came to bring a different message and method of hope, love, healing, and restoration. In reference to the purpose of the incarnation and death of Jesus, Flood quotes Athanasius when he writes, “The death of all was consummated in the Lord’s body; yet, because the Word was in it, *death and corruption were in the same act utterly abolished*” (53). He goes on to say that, in the life and death of Christ, “The death sentence is not fulfilled, it is erased” (53). God does not enter our world through Jesus to fulfill any kind of necessary satisfaction. He comes to overcome the systems of our broken world in order to heal. Flood believes that, “in the Christ event (incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection) this way of retributive justice has been . . . ‘destroyed’ by the superior way of restorative justice. The law of sin and death is therefore overturned and abolished, replaced by the superior economy of grace, which works to set free and restore life” (54). Jesus

comes to defeat evil and heal brokenness, not operate within it. The gospel is a story of victory, not because some cosmic formula of sin and satisfaction is fulfilled, but because the worldly evils of death and corruption are utterly demolished.

As was found in the prior section of the non-violent role of God in the atonement, it was not that the death of Jesus was a result of a need of God's to be satisfied, but rather his death was the inevitable result of God entering into our world so thoroughly corruption by evil and sin. This is a point Flood also understands when he claims, "It is not God who crushed the Servant, it was us – just as it was *for us*" (63). Jesus lived his life perfectly obedient to the law. His life is the characterization and embodiment of righteousness. Therefore, his death was entirely unjust. As Flood argues, "that the punishment – the painful consequence that the servant endures – is undeserved and unjust. It is a miscarriage of justice, not its fulfillment" (65). The death of the perfect servant in such an unjust manner depicts a narrative that moves "towards healing and redeeming sinners – sinners hiding under a mantle of piety, and shows a way to be righteous based on radical mercy" (64). Flood argues:

God brings about justice by submitting to profound injustice. The victory is won by Jesus *losing* his life. God triumphs over our evil by entering into our failure, shame, and affliction. Because of this, the very cycle of violence and dominance is overturned . . . Rome crucified Christ as a common criminal to show that no one can oppose the System. But as Love hung on that cross, the authorities were exposed, unmasked in their hatred. (65).

The death of Christ was the lowest point in human history, the absolute climax of the reality of the depth of human sickness and brokenness, and it exposes us. It is when our hatred is unmasked and our sin exposed that:

We see [that] God incarnate, rather than coming in wrath, is bearing that hurt *for us*. The mask of our self-righteousness is pulled away; the sin of the entire system of retributive justice is exposed; and simultaneously we see that the Servant has endured our injustice in order to heal us. It is a message intended to bring us to our knees, and the very system of retribution along with it. (65)

God has come to show us scandalous grace and mercy in the midst of this truly unjust act. He enters into our world, teaches us, heals us, and loves us. He knew no sin, and yet our hatred and evil causes his death. He shows us true love and mercy in that in his sovereignty and omnipotence he knew this would be the inevitable outcome, and yet he still comes to heal and restore us. He chooses to be faithful in his self-sacrificing, covenantal love, regardless of the cost.

The depth of our sin and brokenness is what made the atonement necessary. We had so deeply ruined our covenantal relationship with the Father that action had to be taken in order to restore it. This atonement comes in the form of divine, restorative justice. In restorative justice, the victory is not in death, but in life. Marshall explains it as:

Christ freely accepted this experience of criminalization and rejection. In so doing he journeyed into 'the far country of our estrangement and despair,' and tasted the bitterness of death . . . Yet his death was also willed by God, because through it God would use human sin and rebellion to achieve

salvation. In his death, Christ plumbed the depths of human wickedness without reserve; he exposed and absorbed human religious and political violence without retaliation, and in so doing broke the inner 'payback' logic of evil. (57)

As we have seen, Jesus' death was completely and wholly unjust. However, God restores and redeems what is unjust. As Flood explains, "What happened to Jesus was horribly unjust, and yet it was how God brought about justice. It was wrong, but God entered into that wrongness and turned it around to make things right" (79). Because God *is* goodness, justice, and righteousness, he is able to redeem even the most unjust actions. To clarify, however, Flood points out, "This does not mean that God condones evil and pain, but that God *overcomes* evil with good. It means that God can enter into all of our ugliness, evil, and hurt, and turn it around" (79). The narrative of the gospel subverts our understanding of justice and our punitive systems. It tells a new story of love and restoration.

We have a solid foundation for why God became incarnate and what caused his death, and now the question remains as to what this action of death on a cross actually accomplished. The true victory of the gospel is found not in the death of Jesus, but in the resurrection. Flood explains that what separates the death of Christ from the death of the martyrs is twofold: the acts of God in the *incarnation* and the *resurrection* (80). He explains that, "First, his death is different from all others because he alone rose from the dead, conquering death itself. Second, his life is different from all others because he alone was God incarnate, standing in place of humanity" (80). The incarnation and resurrection are what distinguish Jesus'

existence from merely death to transformational atonement. Flood explains that, “because Christ took on our humanity in the incarnation, we can participate in his death, and likewise in his overcoming of death in the resurrection” (80). It is the resurrection that brings full restoration. Flood continues by arguing:

God through the incarnation fully embraces us in our brokenness and darkness, even to the point of suffering an unjust death on a cross. Rising from the dead, God makes a new way for us to participate in God’s life in a loving personal relationship that changes us into Christ’s image. The reality of that transformative relationship – of the spirit active and alive in us – is the guarantee that we will also inherit eternal life, overcoming literal sickness and death. (81)

It is through the incarnation that God enters into our world, willingly submits to the evil forces within, then defeats them in resurrection, restoring our relationship with Him in a tangible and transformative way.

The victory found in the resurrection is the ultimate fulfillment of the gospel. As Flood explains, “The resurrection of Jesus thus acts like a window opened up in heaven letting God’s reality burst into our gray world – like an anchor for our soul, holding us to Love, connecting our hearts with God’s heart . . . God’s love is stronger than our evil, and the evil in our world” (81). With an emphasis on the resurrection, God’s justice, biblical justice, looks quite different from that of punitive, or retributive justice. In applying a punitive model of justice to the atonement, the power is in the death of Jesus. The fulfillment of satisfaction is in death, while the resurrection plays virtually no role. As Flood points out, “In fact, one might conclude

that the resurrection undoes the entire punitive verdict that was supposed to appease God's wrath by punishing Jesus. Indeed this is *precisely* what the resurrection does – it undoes the judgment of death . . . Death and suffering are conquered, not satisfied" (81). The resurrection is actually inconsistent with the demands of penal substitution. It hardly adds up to conceive of Jesus' death as satisfying God's demand if he is raised three days later. This would seem to undo the satisfaction paid. This is why the source of restoration must be found in life, not in death.

God's justice not only defeats our worldly understanding of sin, death, punishment, and justice, but it actually subverts it. Flood claims that, "The *theology of the cross*, properly understood, acts to subvert our 'normal' way of thinking, flipping it on its head . . . [It] *crucifies* our normal conceptions of holiness, power, greatness, authority justice, and glory. . . [It] means the death of all pride, triumphalism, judgment, and the theologies of glory" (83). God's justice is not congruent with our systems and ways of understanding justice, but overturns them by subversion through the introduction of the true picture of divine justice. As Marshall explains, "Jesus speaks of the inbreaking of divine justice as the coming of God's kingdom, which starts to put right what is wrong on earth, establishes a relationship of new intimacy between God and humanity, and calls into being a new community to live a transformed way of life in the midst of the old order" (93). In divine justice, we are not given what we deserve (punishment and death). We are given a free gift of love, grace, and mercy that exposes retributive justice for what it is: violent and flawed. Marshall argues that, "The justice of God is fully disclosed in

the gospel because, in the first place, it shows that God has treated the sin of the covenant people with deadly seriousness” (58). The death of Jesus exposes how truly and deeply humanity has broken the covenant relationship with the Father in sin, evil, and injustice. It is not something that God readily overlooks or condones. It is a brokenness so deeply rooted that He finds it altogether necessary to go as far as to come into our world, become a part of this brokenness, submit to its consequences, then utterly demolish it in the victory of resurrection.

In order to understand truly how Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection heal humanity, we must understand what the act of Christ’s death actually accomplished. In the retributive model of justice, the act of the satisfaction changes God’s attitude towards humanity from that of enmity to that of beloved children. This one, isolated act changes everything in an instant. However, if this is the answer to atoning for human sin, then we are to assume that God changes because of this act. I find this problematic. I believe that God is constant. He was deeply hurt by original human sin, the breach of our covenant relationship with him, and our consistent choice to disobey. This disobedience bent us away from Him and separated us from Him in a way that we were unaware of until it was restored once again. That being said, He loved us from the very beginning in the same way He continues to love us now. We made the choice to disobey our covenant relationship with the Father and He decided to come after us to heal us from ourselves. In His life, Jesus relives the life that the original man should have; recapitulating original human brokenness for a new, perfect existence. In His willing submission to an unjust death, He unmask our deep wound of sin and brokenness, revealing to us our need for our relationship

with the Father to be restored. Finally, in resurrection He defeats death, subverting the expectations, norms, and brokenness within the fallen world that had once marked our only understanding before God intervened. Also, because of Jesus' recapitulation, the covenantal relationship with the Father is restored. He has given us a fresh start as a free gift of grace because of His one-way, unchanging love for us.

It is through deeply and personally encountering this radical divine grace, mercy, and love that we can begin to heal from our sickness. Jesus offers us a way into renewing our covenant with the Father. Through the life of Jesus and the restoration of the covenant relationship, humanity is given the new, unbroken presence of the Father. This relationship between God and humankind is restored, giving us a new, deeper awareness of our need for and dependence on Him in this life. Once humanity sees and encounters this scandalous love and grace from the Father, His love begins to transform us. Once we understand that *we are loved* by a Father who was willing to act at that great a length for us, it begins to heal our wound slowly. All of life, therefore, is a process of continually encountering His unending love that never changes and never ceases and then allowing it to transform us. When we consider our everyday sins, we are able to look back to how God dealt with sin in the atonement and know that he is the same God today, dealing with our sin in the same way. He continues to love us even though we are still in the process of healing and He will never give up. God does not love us because He died. God died because He loves us. We are constantly being restored to Him through repentance, and He continues to love relentlessly.

CONCLUSION

In his book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith describes our perspectives as looking through a window. He explains that each of our windowpanes might be a slightly different shape and perhaps the glass a different shade. Sometimes our windows may be dirty from years of neglect and need cleaning and a fresh start (193). We cannot help or change the fact that we see the world through a certain frame, color, or size. We can never view the world entirely objectively and I think that is okay. It was what helps give our world life, color, and different meaning. When it comes to religion, each person that creates meaning for him or herself is a theologian. We are meaning-making beings and it is necessary and helpful to continue to update the ways in which we understand ourselves in this world and outside of it.

Our contemporary culture has a deep need to understand the selfless, sacrificial, and unwavering love the Father demonstrated through the gospel. A story that reflects a different kind of love and justice is a breath of fresh air amongst the world we dwell in today. Our culture needs a better understanding of what love truly is, and particularly the way God loves humanity, and what that means for Christians today. The ideas presented here are just some amongst a myriad of interpretations that will continue to be reformed and reshaped as long as humanity has to make sense of its place in the world and the purpose of our lives. We will continue to do this through the telling and retelling of important narratives that shape our sense of meaning and belonging.

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