ness to humanity and humanity's freedom for and faithfulness to God are perfectly united. In him the perfect love of God and a perfect human response are one. Seen from one perspective, God elects Jesus as God's "chosen," God's "beloved" (Matt. 12:18); seen from another perspective, Jesus is entirely devoted to God and freely subordinates his will to God's (Luke 22:42). In perfect mutual love, divinity and humanity are distinct yet personally united in Jesus Christ.

In summary, while faint analogies of the unity of divinity and humanity in the incarnate Lord may be found in the "paradox of grace" in Christian life, or even in common human experiences of intimate personal relationship in which two may think, will, and act as one, the identity of Jesus Christ as described by Scripture and creed is a mystery beyond comprehension. The relationship of God to Jesus and of Jesus to God has its basis and fullest analogy in the mystery of the eternal exchange of love in the life of the triune God.

Rethinking Classical Interpretations of the Work of Christ

While the ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ all belong to the liberating and reconciling work of Christ, the cross has been the center of attention in most doctrines of atonement in Western theology. The New Testament uses many different metaphors to express what happened in Christ's death for us. We find financial, legal, military, sacrificial, and other metaphors, all of which contain treasures of meaning. Despite the familiarity of these metaphors, they can still surprise us with fresh insight. Some of the New Testament metaphors of the work of Christ have been expanded into elaborate theories of atonement. Even if no single understanding of the atoning work of Jesus Christ has received ecumenical approval, there have been several prominent theories of atonement in Christian theology.

1. One of these is called the cosmic conflict or Christ the Victor theory. This theory—a favorite among many patristic theologians—develops the battle metaphor found in some New Testament passages (e.g., Col. 2:15). According to this view, the work of atonement is a dramatic struggle between God and the forces of evil in the world. The deity of Christ is deeply hidden in human form. The evil forces are thus fooled into thinking he is an easy prey. Gregory of Nyssa uses the colorful image of a fish unsuspectingly swallowing the bait on a fishhook. Under the veil of his humanity, Christ triumphs over the demons, the devil, and all the principalities and powers that hold human beings captive. By his cross and resurrection, Christ decisively defeats these powers and thus frees their captives.

While this theory helpfully emphasizes the reality and power of evil forces that hold humanity in bondage, and while it correctly stresses the costliness and assurance of God's victory, its limitations are readily evident. It is especially misleading if its imagery of bait on a fishhook is interpreted in a literalistic way that reduces the humanity of Jesus to a mere disguise to fool the evil powers, or if its language of a cosmic battle between God and the devil serves to undermine the awareness of human responsibility for its sinful condition. Thinking of the atoning work of Christ in this way would make believers mere spectators of a cosmic struggle that takes place over their heads. Some critics of the Christ the Victor theory have also asked whether it is overly triumphalist and leads to a denial of the continuing power of evil and sin in history and in our own lives.

Despite these limitations, the cosmic battle theory of the atonement enshrines at least two deep truths. One is that God achieves the liberation and reconciliation of the world not by employing coercion or brute force but by the foolish wisdom of the cross. God does not defeat evil by evil means but through the power of divine love. As Gregory of Nyssa puts it, "God's transcendent power is not so much displayed in the vastness of the heavens, or the luster of the stars, or the orderly arrangement of the universe or his perpetual oversight of it, as in his condescension to our weak nature." Another truth embedded in the cosmic battle theory is that evil forces are not only destructive but self-destructive. As morally offensive as the idea that God uses deception in the work of salvation may be, what the crude images of this theory intend to convey is that God's hidden or "foolish" way of redeeming humanity is wiser and stronger than the apparently invincible forces of evil. It is worth noting that some feminist theologians have called for a retrieval of the insights of the classical battle theory of the atonement.

2. Another influential theory of atonement is the Anselmian satisfaction theory. It is rooted in biblical passages that suggest vicarious suffering as the way by which humankind is redeemed (e.g., Isa. 53; Gal. 3:13). The theory finds classic expression in Anselm's Cur Deus Homo? ("Why Did God Become

Human?"), Anselm's reflections on this question arise out of the medieval thought world and presuppose then-current understandings of law, offense, reparations, and social obligations. God and humans are related like feudal lords and their serfs. Since disobedience dishonors the lord, either satisfaction must be given or punishment must follow. The satisfaction that is due to God on account of the offense of sin is infinite. While humanity must provide this satisfaction, only God can provide it. "None but God can make this satisfaction... none but a human being ought to do this." For this reason God has become human in Christ. In his perfect obedience unto death, satisfaction is rendered, justice is done, God's honor is restored, and sinners are forgiven.

The humanity of Christ is given a more significant role in this theory of atonement than in the cosmic conflict theory. Moreover, the seriousness of sin and the costliness of redemption are expressed in a way that was intelligible to the church in the medieval period. But the satisfaction theory as traditionally presented also raises serious questions. Most important of all, it seems to set God in contradiction to Godself. It draws upon the juridical metaphors of the New Testament in a way that brings mercy and justice into collision. In other words, the Anselmian theory makes the act of forgiveness something of a problem for God. Grace is made conditional on satisfaction. But is conditional grace still grace? According to the New Testament, it is not God but humanity who needs to be reconciled. In the New Testament God is not so much the object as the subject of reconciliation in Christ.

Standing firmly in the tradition of the Anselmian satisfaction theory, John Calvin nevertheless wavered on the question whether the motive of the atonement was the need to satisfy God's righteous anger or whether God was moved by pure and freely given love for the world. While also deeply indebted to the Anselmian tradition, Karl Barth moves beyond both Anselm and Calvin by consistently interpreting the atoning work of Christ as motivated solely by the holy love of God.

Another failing of the satisfaction theory, as traditionally stated, is that it does not adequately distinguish between a substitute and a representative. Dorothee Sölle has made this point rather convincingly. The world of substitution is the impersonal world of replaceable things. When a part of a machine wears out, a new part can be substituted. Representation, however, belongs in the world of persons and personal relationships. A representative stands in for us, speaks and acts for us, without simply displacing us. In other words, a representative does not divest us of responsibility. Parents, for example, represent their children until their maturity, when they are able to speak and act for themselves. The atoning work of Christ is more faithfully and understandably interpreted as an act of personal representation rather than a work of mechanical substitution.

3. A third prominent theory of atonement is often called the moral influence theory. It is also described as the "subjective" theory, in contrast to the "objective" emphasis of the two theories already outlined. In the moral influence theory Christ reconciles humanity neither by some cosmic battle nor by some legal transaction — both of which would appear to be complete apart from any participation of those on behalf of whom the action is performed. Rather, Christ shows God's love to us in such a compelling way that we are constrained to respond in wonder and gratitude. The atoning work of Christ is complete only when it is appropriated in the act of faith and allowed to transform one's life.

Abelard, a contemporary of Anselm, is often named as the foremost representative of the moral influence theory of the atonement. The Abelardian theory is sometimes called exemplarist. However, it is not at all clear that Abelard reduces the work of Christ to that of mere example. Some passages in Abelard's writings indicate that for him the love of God in Christ is a divine benefit, a creative gift that generates the response of love in us. While it cannot be said that Abelard himself succeeded in clarifying the fact that the power of the love of God in Christ is greater than any mere example, his line of thought can certainly be extended to include this explanation. What Christ does is revelatory and exemplary, but "above and beyond its exemplary value, there is in it a surplus of mysterious causal efficacy that no merely human love possesses."

The moral influence theory has its strength in emphasizing the unconditional nature and transforming power of God's love and in stressing the importance of our human response. While attending primarily to the "subjective" side of atonement, the theory might also be developed in a way that recognizes the objective web of illusions and self-deceptions that constitute our sinful condition as well as the objective power of the revelation of God's sacrificial love that shines into our sin-darkened world. Still, it is undoubt-
edly true that many versions of the moral influence theory, especially in the modern era, have tended toward a sentimentalization of God’s love, underestimated the power and tenacity of evil in the world, and depicted Jesus as merely a good example for people to follow. Still relevant is H. Richard Niebuhr’s critique of a naive form of liberal theology in America: “A God without wrath brought people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministries of a Christ without a cross.”

These theories of atonement, and the New Testament metaphors on which they are based, are not mutually exclusive. Of course, at various times in the history of theology there have been those who have argued that one or another of them embodies total and exclusive truth. When such absolutization of one image or one theory occurs, there is a loss of the riches of the New Testament proclamation and the centuries-long meditation of the church on the meaning of the atoning work of Christ.

Moreover, each of the three theories can be reclaimed and reinterpreted for our own time, with its particular sense of bondage and cry for liberation. Through the ministry and cross of Christ, God does something decisive on behalf of oppressed humanity, liberating us from evil forces that enslave us, freeing us from our burden of guilt, restoring moral order in a disordered world, setting us free from the illusions and self-deceptions that bring destruction on our neighbors as well as ourselves, and awakening new faith, hope, and love in us. It is instructive that in the current hymnody of the church all three views of the atonement are represented, as can be seen, for example, in the three hymns “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (Christ the Victor), “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” (satisfaction), and “God of Grace and God of Glory” (moral influence).

John Calvin’s doctrine of the three offices of Christ (munus triplex) offers help in keeping our understanding of the atonement open and inclusive. Calvin says that Christ acts as our prophet, priest, and king.44 In this doctrine of the three offices, Calvin is able to include the teaching of Jesus, his sacrificial death, and his lordly rule. We might restate Calvin’s teaching of the three offices of Christ as follows: Christ as prophet proclaims the coming reign of God and instructs us in the form of life appropriate to that reign (moral influence); Christ as priest renders to God the perfect sacrifice of love and obedience on our behalf (satisfaction); Christ as designated king rules the world despite the recalcitrance of evil and promises the ultimate victory of God’s reign of righteousness and peace (Christ the Victor).

In his elaborate doctrine of reconciliation, Karl Barth also makes use of the idea of three offices of Christ, imaginatively weaving them together with the classical doctrines of the two natures (divinity and humanity) of the one person of Christ and his two states (humiliation and exaltation). This yields the themes of “The Lord as Servant” (God in Jesus Christ acts humbly as our priest, redeeming us from our sin of pride), “The Servant as Lord” (humanity in Jesus Christ is exalted by grace to royal partnership with God, liberating us from our sin of sloth), and “The True Witness” (the union of God and humanity in Jesus Christ is radiant truth, carrying its own prophetic power and dispelling our sin of falsehood).45 Calvin’s and Barth’s theologies of the person and work of Christ are richer for their inclusive approach to the wealth of metaphors in the New Testament witness and the mutually corrective motifs of classical theology.

Our reflections on several prominent views of atonement suggest that fruitful interpretations of the work of Christ should be guided in our time by the following principles:

(1) We should respect the riches of the New Testament metaphors of atonement and the diversity of classical formulations rather than seeking to reduce everything to one common denominator.

(2) The atoning work of Christ encompasses the whole gospel story: his ministry, teaching, cross, and resurrection. None of these should be omitted or isolated from the others.

(3) The work of atonement is based on God’s gracious initiative, but it also calls for a human response. An adequate doctrine of atonement will give both factors their appropriate attention.

(4) The grace of God includes judgment, and the judgment of God serves the purpose of grace. A doctrine of atonement should not present the grace and judgment of God as conflicting with each other.

(5) The atoning work of God in Christ has significance for individuals, society, and the entire cosmos.

### Violence and the Cross

The Scriptures unanimously affirm that the death of Jesus was “for us,” “for our sins,” “for many,” “for the world.” “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3). This scriptural affirmation is present, ex-

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42. See Calvin, Institutes, I.iv.


44. See Calvin, Institutes, I.iv.