The Christian Doctrine of Substitutionary Atonement

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“What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.”

- King Solomon

Within recent years a movement has been “emerging” within Christianity promising to repaint the Christian faith. The leaders of this movement depict modern Christianity as a rigid, dusty orthodoxy, filled with endless dogmas and doctrines. According to their perspective, true Christianity must be understood as fluid, changing, and being reworked to throw off the straightjacket of doctrines restricting its modern relevance. Among these doctrines being reworked is the Christian teaching of substitutionary atonement—the belief that Jesus died to pay humanity’s moral debt to God.

Rob Bell, a prominent leader of this emerging movement, recently completed his national speaking tour entitled “The Gods Aren’t Angry.” During his presentation, Bell shares three insights that form the basis of his talk. According to Bell, his third “revelation” came in Jesus. The sacrificial system in Leviticus became corrupt and led people to believe that God was angry with them. But at just the right time, God revealed that he never needed their sacrifice.

The problem, Bell suggests, is not that God is angry with us, but that we think he is angry with us. While talking about the sacrificial system, Bell says, “the blood was never for God, that was just to help humans live with, absorb, and trust, the love of a God who keeps on insisting, trust me.” Thus, Jesus’ did not come to change God’s mind about us, but to change our mind about God. His mission had nothing to do with appeasing God’s anger toward humanity; instead, he came to emancipate us from the slavery of alienation we feel towards him.

But there is really nothing new in what Bell is saying. Far from being a fresh take on the atonement, Bell is recycling a historic view of the atonement called the “moral influence theory.” And really, most modern attempts to rework and repaint the Christian teaching of the atonement are mere reproductions of someone else’s work.

This essay, then, is a response to the growing movement within Christianity, which denies substitutionary atonement. It aims to provide Scripture an opportunity to speak as the final arbiter in determining the atonement’s purpose. It is my conviction that when Scripture is given a fair hearing, it clearly and consistently depicts the atonement as a sin-bearing, substitutionary death.

In what follows, then, we will begin by sketching three major theories of the atonement. Many of the new perspectives on the atonement are simply repackaged replicas of one these three theories. Then, we will survey what Scripture has to say about the atonement. This will help us to evaluate which of the three theories accords best with Scripture’s portrayal of the atonement.
And in the final section, we will evaluate some of the common objections leveled against substitutionary atonement.

Major Theories of the Atonement

Moral-Influence Theory

Peter Abelard was the first to develop the moral influence theory of the atonement (1079-1142). His theory was largely a reaction to Anselm’s view, widely held at the time, that the incarnation was necessary because our sin has offended God’s moral dignity. In order to protect his honor, God required some form of compensation. Conversely, Abelard emphasized the primacy of God’s love. He insisted that Jesus did not make a sacrificial payment to the Father in order to satisfy his offended dignity; instead, Jesus demonstrated the full extent of God’s love for the human race. Thus, the primary issue of the atonement is not to uphold God’s honor, but rather to relieve the fear and alienation humans feel towards God.

At first, Abelard’s theory did not receive much support. Many years later, however, it regained popularity when other advocates of the theory began to expound it. Most notably, Horace Bushnell (1802-76) popularized the theory in the United States, while Hastings Rashdall led the way in Great Britain. The remaining explanation of the moral-influence theory will be primarily drawn from the work of these men.

Advocates of the moral-influence theory stress that God’s essential nature is love. They tend to downplay his other qualities such as his justice, holiness, and righteousness. Thus, they conclude that humans should not be afraid of God’s punishment. Instead, our problem has to do with our view of God, which prevents us from turning to him.

Our feelings of alienation and estrangement from God present themselves in many different ways. For instance, we may not realize that our rebellion and disobedience towards God is a source of pain to God; or we may not understand that in spite of all that we have done, God still loves us. And yet, if we would just repent and turn back to God, there would be reconciliation. The problem does not have to do with God’s ability to forgive. Nothing in his nature requires payment for our sins. The difficulty is with us. Bushnell views sin as a type of sickness from which we must be healed. This, then, is why Jesus came: to heal us.

Unlike more objective theories of the atonement, which view Jesus’ death as central to the purpose of his coming, advocates of the moral-influence theory believe that Jesus came solely as an expression of God’s divine love. His death was merely one aspect of his love for us. Consequently, Jesus’ death was an opportunity or a circumstance to demonstrate his love. As Bushnell explains: “[Jesus’] sacrifice, taken as a fact in time, was not set before him as the end, or object of his ministry –that would make it a mere pageant of suffering, without rational dignity, or character –but, when it came, it was simply the bad fortune such a work, prosecuted with such devotion, must encounter on its way.” Far from squaring up the account of our sin or satisfying God’s divine justice, Jesus’ death was not the central purpose of his coming; it was a consequence of his coming.

Bushnell sees his view consistently expressed throughout Scripture. For instance, Jesus’ mission can be found in his own words: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (Lk. 19:10). In another place, Paul tells us: “God was reconciling the world to himself in
Christ” (2 Cor. 5:19). In the parable of the Lost Son (Lk. 15), Jesus tells the story of a father who longs for his son’s return and rejoices when his son finally comes to his senses and returns home. Although these passages make use of various expressions and images, they bear the same common idea: the Father loves us and the sending of Son was an expression of this. Thus, Jesus’ death should be seen as accomplishing three things:

1. **Jesus’ death was aimed at removing our fear of God.** When we turn to the very first pages of the Bible, we are told that Adam and Eve had sinned against God. Shortly after this, they felt estranged from God and tried to hide from him. This, the Bible tells us, is the natural human response to guilt: avoidance. Brokenhearted over our response, Jesus entered our situation and died a brutal death. Bushnell powerfully describes its effect upon us: “In a word we see him entered so deeply into our lot, that we are softened and drawn by him, and even begin to want him entered more deeply, that we may feel him more constrainingly. In this way a great point is turned in our recovery. Our heart is engaged before it is broken. We like the Friend before we love the Savior.”

2. **Jesus’ death causes us to feel remorse that ultimately leads to repentance.** According to proponents of the moral influence theory, we need a profound internal conviction that leads to a genuine sense of sorrow for turning away from God. This is why Jesus came to die. When we face what John Stott describes as “that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness,” only then we will be softened, only then will we find our resistance to God gone, only then will we finally turn to Jesus in love.

3. **Jesus’ death gives us inspiration.** We need more than an abstract description of how to live our lives. What we need is something more practical. According to Bushnell, we don’t want theological definitions of God; instead, “we want a friend, whom we can feel as a man, and whom it will be sufficiently accurate for us to accept and love.” Thus, Jesus humanized God, bringing him down to our level.

To sum up, then, the moral influence theory emphasizes God’s love and mercy over his justice and holiness. Thus, the atonement is primarily directed towards humanity. Far from satisfying God’s divine justice, Jesus came to untangle the fear and estrangement that arrests us whenever we try to turn to God.

**Ransom Theory**

It may be fair to say that the ransom theory was the standard theory of the atonement in the early church. Giants of the early church such as Augustine, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa held this view of the atonement, and it dominated the church’s understanding of the atonement until the time of Anselm (1033-1109).

Origen saw salvation history as a divine drama that was unfolding. In the cosmic struggle between good and evil, Satan established his control over humanity. And as the “ruler of this world,” his rights could not be simply set aside. Thus, the central problem facing humanity is its enslavement to an unfit ruler, Satan.

The primary text that Origen relied upon in his understanding was Jesus’ statement in Mark 10:45: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (emphasis mine). One may very well ask, “To whom was this ransom being
paid?” Certainly, God did not pay a ransom to himself. So, then, to whom was Jesus given as a ransom? Origen thought that it was to the evil one, Satan, who held us captive.

In Origen’s original formulation of this theory, Satan demanded Jesus’ blood as a ransom for the human race. This anticipated the potential charge that God was dishonest in his dealings with Satan. After all, it was Satan who initiated the ransom. Far from being deceived by God, Satan actually deceived himself. In the first place, he wrongly thought that he could hold Jesus in death. Satan did not anticipate the resurrection. Second, he released the human race before realizing that he could not hold Jesus in death.8

Nearly a century later, Gregory of Nyssa elaborated on Origen’s ransom theory. In his formulation, Gregory was concerned to uphold God’s justice. He reasoned that since our captivity was due to our own choice, it would have been unwarranted for God to take from Satan what was rightfully his. Thus, an exchange had to take place. Blinded by his pride and greed, Satan hastily accepted the life of Jesus, God’s son, in exchange for the human race. However, Satan failed to realize that Jesus’ deity was enveloped in human flesh.9 God deliberately concealed it from Satan so that he would accept Jesus as a ransom. Gregory summarizes his view by way of analogy: “The Deity was hidden under the veil of our nature, so that, as with ravenous fish, the hook of the Deity might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh.”10

Unflinchingly, Gregory not only acknowledged God’s deception of Satan, he even justified it. He argued that an act is just if it fulfills two conditions. First, each party should receive its due. And second, the act should be motivated by love. Jesus’ death met both conditions. It was fitting that deception was used on Satan since he used deception to enslave the human race. And it was further justified because it was aimed at redeeming the human race.

In a later formulation of the ransom theory, Augustine carefully sought to avert the potential charge that God had been dishonest or unjust.11 He did this by suggesting that God did not actively deceive Satan, he only permitted the deception. Jesus’ deity had not been hidden from Satan to trick him. Instead, Satan was the victim of his own pride. He foolishly thought that he could hold Jesus in death, though he possessed no such power. Since Jesus was without sin, Satan had no control over him.12

The ransom theory endured for nearly six centuries as the primary way people understood the atonement. But with the rise of Anselm and Peter Abelard’s theories of the atonement, the ransom theory fell out of prominence. In recent times, however, Gustaf Aulen has resuscitated it. He has termed this view the “classic view” and has maintained that the atonement primarily centered upon God’s triumph.13

To sum up this view, then, the ransom theory suggests that the ultimate purpose of Jesus’ death was to liberate the human race from the evil one’s bondage. Unlike the moral influence theory, which views the atonement as aimed primarily at humans, the ransom theory views the atonement as directed towards Satan.

**Substitution Theory**

A final theory of the atonement is commonly referred to as the substitution or satisfaction theory. This theory suggests that the primary purpose of Jesus’ death was to satisfy God’s justice. Thus, the primary force of the atonement was not directed towards restoring humanity or
prevailing over the evil one; instead it served as a payment to God for wrongdoing committed against him.

The earliest and most prominent advocate of this theory was Anselm (1033-1109), archbishop of Canterbury. Anselm’s lived during a time when violations of law were no longer thought of in a judicial sense, as they were during the Roman Empire. Instead, he lived in a feudal society where justice and law were viewed as more of a personal matter. Breaking the law was thought to be an offense against the person of the feudal overlord. Immersed in this way of thinking, Anselm pictured God as a feudal overlord who, in order to preserve his honor, insisted that adequate reparations be made to compensate for his loss.14

By way of an apologetic response to his Muslim critics, Anselm offered his fullest treatment of substitutionary atonement in Cur Deus Homo (Or, “Why God became man”). In it, he attempted to argue that the incarnation and atonement of Jesus were logically necessary.

Anselm rejected Gregory’s formulation of the ransom theory and even Augustine’s modification of it. His contention with the theory had to do with its central claim that Satan had a right to possess the human race. According to Anselm, no one has the right to possess the human race besides God. He believed that we are, by right, God’s possession. Even Satan himself belongs to God. Therefore, God did not have to purchase humanity from Satan.15

Anselm’s formulation of the atonement is directly extracted from his view of sin. After all, as Millard Erickson observes, “[W]hat sin is understood to be will strongly influence one’s view of what must be done to counter it.”16 From Anselm’s point of view, sin is a failure to give God his due. By failing to give God his due, we take from God what is rightfully his, thus dishonoring him. But it is not good enough to restore what was taken from God. For by taking from him, we have offended him. And even if what was taken had been returned, God must be further compensated for the injury committed against him.17 By way of analogy, Erickson clarifies: “A good comparison is modern judicial rulings which stipulate that a thief, in addition to restoring his victim’s property, must pay punitive damages or serve a prison sentence.”18

As rightful owner and ruler of the universe, God must act to preserve his honor and cannot simply overlook an offense. His just character demands that he punish moral wrongdoing. Nor is it enough for us to simply restore what was taken from him. As Jonathan Edwards explains, the heinousness of the crime is determined not only by the nature of the action, but also by the dignity and worth of the person offended.19 Thus, there must be additional compensation. Otherwise, the unpunished sin would leave God’s whole economy out of order.20

Anticipating a counter argument from his critics, Anselm confronts the question, “Why, then, did not God simply inflict punishment upon the human race?” Attempting to demonstrate the necessity of the incarnation, Anselm argues that some humans must be saved to balance out the loss of fallen angels. Since fallen angels cannot be saved, they must be replaced by an equivalent amount of humans. Thus, a certain portion of humanity must be restored.21

Naturally, then, satisfaction must be rendered on their behalf. Even if human beings were to do their best and happened by chance to accomplish perfection, that would be nothing more than giving God his due. To illustrate this point, take the example of Mother Teresa. Most would admit that, morally speaking, their lives do not measure up to Mother Teresa’s. However, imagine for a moment that by some chance you were able to achieve a moral height surpassing even that of Mother Teresa. You would be inclined to feel a sense of accomplishment (of course not to the point of being arrogant about it). However, going even a step further, imagine that by some extraordinary feat you were able to achieve a life of perfection. You have abstained from thoughts of moral wrongdoing, let alone committing them; you have sold all of your possessions
and have given the payment to the poor; and you have escaped your life of comfort and instead dedicated yourself to serving others. Most of us, at this point, would suspect that a life like this should merit us some sort of favor from God. But according to Anselm, this is nothing more than giving God his due.

This, then, was the human predicament: God created us with the expectation that we would live a life of moral perfection. However, we have failed to do this. Thus, death has come upon us. God saw it necessary to salvage at least part of the human race, but in order to accomplish this, some sort of satisfaction needed to take place. Moreover, for it to be effective, that satisfaction needed to be greater than simply returning what was due to God. Therefore, only God could have provided this sort of satisfaction. Yet, if it was to benefit to humanity, it had to be made by a human being. Thus, the satisfaction needed to be furnished by someone who was both God and a human being. Consequently, Anselm argues, the incarnation was a logical necessity. Without it, there was no possibility of satisfaction, and thus no possibility of forgiveness. 22

This is precisely why Jesus came. Being both God and a sinless human, Jesus is capable of representing humanity and offering more than what is required of him as a human being. Thus, Jesus could offer his life to God as a genuine sacrifice for humanity’s sins. The death of the God-man was of infinite value. In fact, for Jesus’ body to suffer even the slightest bit of harm would have been a matter of infinite value. 23

By way of contrast, to both the moral influence theory and the ransom theory, the substitutionary theory of the atonement is focused Godward. Unlike the former two theories, substitutionary atonement is directed neither toward humanity nor toward the evil one. Rather, substitutionary atonement sees Jesus’ Jesus’ atonement as primarily aimed at satisfying God’s justice.

Before moving on, it is important to note that while these are competing theories of the atonement, they are not entirely incompatible. Rather, the proponents of each view argue that their particular view of the atonement is the primary way one should understand the atonement. Moreover, they would suggest that their view possesses the explanatory power to make sense of the entire corpus of Scripture related to the atonement. This, then, sets us off to our next task: finding out what Scripture says about the atonement.

**Scripture Voices Its View of the Atonement**

At this point, we will briskly survey the relevant texts of Scripture to construct a biblical view of the atonement.

**The Old Testament**

*The Book of Job*

The ending of Job seems to allude to substitutionary atonement. Following the climax of the story –when God confronts Job for presuming that God had made a mistake and Job repents for his lack of understanding– God deals with Job’s friends, who in their folly, have not spoken
accurately of God (42:8). God was angry with them for insisting that Job was being punished for sins he committed. To atone for their wrongdoing, God instructed Job’s friends to bring their sacrifices to Job. Further, God tells Job’s friends, “My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly” (42:8).

There are two details of this story that seem to point to substitutionary atonement. First, God instructed Job’s friends to offer an animal sacrifice as a way to alleviate God’s anger towards them. The implication is obvious: God’s anger is satisfied by a sacrificial death. Secondly, God directed Job’s friends to have Job pray for them. This is because God refused to deal with them due to their wrongdoing. Instead, he required someone to mediate between him and the guilty party. It is also interesting that the mediator God chose, Job, was a human being like his friends. This may suggest that there needed to be some sort of connection, some point of commonality between the mediator and the guilty party being represented.

Passover

Another signpost leading us in the direction of Jesus’ atoning work is the Old Testament feast of Passover. Right before the final plague was sent upon Egypt, God instructed each household in Israel to take an unblemished lamb and slaughter it before twilight. They were told to take the blood of the lamb and apply it to the doorpost and doorway of their house. That same night, they were to eat the roasted meat along with bitter herbs and bread made without yeast, and to do so in haste—their cloaks tucked into their belts, their sandals already on their feet, and their staffs in hand. If all of these instructions were followed carefully, the judgment of the Lord would “pass over” their households. God further instructed those who carefully followed his instructions and escaped Egypt to continue to celebrate this feast as a lasting ordinance.

When we turn to the pages of the New Testament, several references are made suggesting a connection between the atonement and Passover. Reflecting back on this event, Paul connects the Passover to Jesus’ death. Speaking of sin that had infiltrated the Corinthian church and was spreading, Paul pleads with them: “Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7). In the Gospel of John, we are told that when John the Baptist saw Jesus, he declared, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn. 1:29), which is most likely a reference to the Passover lamb.

With this connection between Jesus’ atonement and the Passover in place, we have warrant to interpret the individual elements of the Passover as alluding to the atonement. First, the Passover lamb was unblemished. This suggested that the victim needed to be innocent. Second, salvation was by substitution. The only firstborn males spared were the ones in whose families a lamb had died instead. Third, the lamb’s blood had to be applied to the doorpost for the family to be rescued. Blood was a sign indicating an innocent life had been taken and that God’s judgment should pass over that household. And finally, the Judge and Savior are the same person. It was God who both “passed through” Egypt to judge the firstborn and “passed over” Israelite homes to protect them.
To further expand our understanding of the atonement, we now turn to the Old Testament sacrificial system. Before Jesus’ death, God commanded the Israelite community to offer animal sacrifices to compensate for sins they committed. These sacrifices were necessary not to deter people from committing further sins nor to reform their sinful mindsets, but to atone for sins that deserved to be punished. God’s law, a representation of his character, had been offended; thus God himself had been offended. And the only way to set things right with God was to offer up the life of an animal as an act of “atonement.” Millard Erickson explains the significance of this word:

The Hebrew word most commonly used in the Old Testament for the various types of atonement is *kaphar* and its derivatives. The word literally means “to cover.” One was delivered from punishment by the interposing of something between one’s sin and God. God then saw the atoning sacrifice rather than the sin. The covering of the sin meant that the penalty no longer had to be exacted from the sinner.26

These were the terms of payment God had specified for sins committed. In short, a life had to be taken for a life to be spared.

Apart from the significance of the word atonement, the actual features of the ceremony are significant to understanding its intended effect. First of all, the sacrificial animal had to be spotless. This was to indicate that the animal was an innocent substitute for the guilty party. When the person presented the animal to the priest, he was to lay his hands on the animal: “He is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him” (Lev. 1:3-4). This laying on of hands represented the confession of sins committed and the symbolic transference of guilt to the innocent victim.27 Once the worshipper laid his hands on the animal and killed it, the priest would apply the animal’s blood to the altar, burn some of its flesh, and lay out whatever was left for the purpose of consumption. This ritual, Stott observes, “was significant symbolism, not meaningless magic.”28

Of course, the blood of the animal was central to the significance of the atonement. While spelling out the prohibition of eating blood to the Israelite community, God explains its significance in the atonement: “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life” (Lev. 17:11). Blood was the symbol of life, and a life needed to be taken in order for sin to be forgiven. Taking a peek ahead into the New Testament to corroborate our findings, the author of Hebrews tells us that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22).

The annual Day of Atonement adds some interesting details to our understanding of the atonement. The sacrifice on the Day of Atonement was much like a typical sin offering, except for a few features. First, only the high priest could perform the sacrifice. Second, the sacrifice was offered for the entire Israelite community. Third, the blood was to be sprinkled onto the Holy of Holies, located in the innermost chamber of the Temple. And finally, two animals were sacrificed. The high priest was instructed to “take two male goats for a sin offering” in order to atone for the sins of the entire Israelite community (Lev. 16:5). One goat was to be sacrificed and its blood sprinkled in the usual way, while the high priest was to take the other living goat and lay both of his hands on its head and “confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat’s head” (Lev. 16:21). Then he was to drive the goat away into the desert so that it would “carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place” (Lev. 16:22).
Reflecting back on this solemn day in the Jewish calendar, the author of Hebrews views the Day of Atonement as a mere shadow of what would come in Christ. First, he interprets the High Priest’s role in the ritual as symbolic of Jesus’ role as the ultimate mediator between God and humans. Moreover, the author of Hebrews interprets the humanity of the High Priest as a depiction of the incarnation: “Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:17).

Second, the author of Hebrews informs us that the victim offered on the Day of Atonement was symbolic of the sacrifice Jesus offered for humanity. But there is one major difference: Jesus was not only the mediator, he was also the sacrifice. Later on in his letter, the author of Hebrews reveals that he views the identities of the High Priest and the victim as having been united in Christ: “Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself” (He. 7:27). In the same way that the High Priest made a sacrifice for the entire Israelite community, Jesus’ death was for the benefit of the entire human race. This is why the author of Hebrews is able to conclude, “Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people” (Heb. 9:28).

Finally, the High Priest’s entrance on the Day of Atonement into the inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, pointed to Jesus’ ability to enter God’s presence. While speaking of the hope we have in Christ, the author of Hebrews says, “It [our hope] enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.” Of course, the author of Hebrews is not talking about the literal inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies in the Temple. He is referring to the actual throne room of God, for which the Holy of Holies stood as a copy: “For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence” (Heb. 9:24).

**Looking Forward to A More Permanent Solution to Sin**

At a later time in Israel’s history, God reveals the provisional nature of the Old Testament sacrificial system. There we are told to anticipate a more permanent solution to humanity’s sin problem.

Written in the wake of his murderous affair with Bathsheba, David’s famous Psalm of repentance describes the inadequacy of burnt offerings: “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart” (Ps. 51:16-17). This is one of the first passages in the Old Testament to indicate the insufficiency of the sacrificial system.

With the immanent ruin of Israel in view, Isaiah receives a vision from God regarding its future deliverance. At the outset of Isaiah’s vision, God speaks of his displeasure with Israel’s animal sacrifices: “The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the Lord. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats” ( Isa. 1:11). At this point in Israel’s history, God was fed up with the people’s outward religious observance. They were simply going through the motions. And from God’s point of view, burnt offerings were no longer effective to atone for sin. The author of Hebrews explains:
The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship...But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased (10:1-6).

The sacrificial system was merely a shadow, a symbol of God's ultimate solution to humanity's sin problem.

Looking again at the book of Isaiah, God begins to uncover his plan to provide a permanent solution to humanity's sin problem. Near the end of Isaiah's vision, we encounter a shadowy figure, the “Servant of the Lord.” The most noteworthy description of this servant is in chapter 53. Following a dramatic description of the type of torture and eventual death the servant will face, Isaiah indicates the purpose of this servant's appearance: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on [the servant] the iniquity of us all" (v. 6). Again in verse 12 we are told, "[H]e bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." This suffering servant was to take upon himself the sins of the human race, in the same way the sins of a worshipper were transferred onto an innocent animal in a sin offering or the Atonement offering.

Of all the passages in the Old Testament, none is more consistently applied to Jesus by the New Testament authors than Isaiah 53. “No other passage from the Old Testament, Joachim Jeremias observes, "was as important to the Church as Isaiah 53." The New Testament writers quote eight specific verses in Isaiah 53 as having been fulfilled by Jesus. Isaiah 53:1 (“Who has believed our message”) is applied to Jesus by John in John 12:38. Matthew sees Isaiah 53:4 (“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our diseases”) as a fulfillment of Jesus’ healing ministry (Matt. 8:17). First Peter 2:22-25 contains extensive quotations from Isaiah 53. Peter directly quotes Isaiah 53:9 (“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth”) as being fulfilled by Jesus (1 Pet. 2:22). In the same passage, he acknowledges that we, like sheep, have gone astray (Isa. 53:6), but that by Jesus’ wounds we have been healed (Isa. 53:7). He also echoes Isaiah 53:11 (“he will bear their iniquities”) as the reason we can die to sin and live for righteousness (1 Pet. 2:24). And finally, Phillip found the Ethiopian eunuch reading Isaiah 53:7-8 –a description of the servant being led like a sheep to the slaughter and having his justice and life taken away– right before telling him the good news about Jesus (Acts 8:30-35). Additionally, there are dozens of allusions throughout the New Testament that connect Jesus to the suffering servant of Isaiah 53.

The New Testament

The Writings of Paul

We now turn our attention to the New Testament to gather more detailed information about the atonement. The early Pauline epistles provide us with a rich collection of teaching on the atonement.

Paul frequently thought of and referred to Jesus’ death as a sacrifice. In Galatians 3:13, Paul makes a stunning statement about Jesus’ death: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree’” (Gal.
3:13). Echoing this language, Peter says, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pet. 2:25). In both cases, Paul’s and Peter’s references to the “tree” are connected to Old Testament instructions regarding the body of a man hanged for a capital offense. Deuteronomy 21:22-23 prohibits the body of such a man to be left hanging on the tree overnight, and commands the body to be buried on the same day “because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse.” The apostles were familiar with this legislation and with its implication that Jesus died under the divine curse. Of course, they did not think that Jesus deserved to be cursed by God in any way. Therefore, they must have understood this to mean that it was our curse that Jesus was bearing. Further clarifying this conclusion, Paul tells the Corinthians: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Again, Paul is not suggesting that our moral qualities were transferred onto Christ. Instead, the legal consequences of our sin were transferred: Jesus voluntarily accepted liability for our sins.32

Another indication that Paul viewed Jesus’ death as sacrificial are the numerous references he makes to Jesus’ blood:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things...by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Col. 1:20).

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! (Rom. 5:9).

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. (Rom. 3:25).

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins. (Eph. 1:7).

You who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. (Eph. 2:13).

In each of these texts, Paul takes Jesus’ death and affixes its significance to the Old Testament notion of atonement (Lev. 17:11). Thus, we see that Paul understood Jesus’ blood as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of humanity.

Finally, Paul is clear in his writing that Jesus died on our behalf. In Romans 8:32, Paul tells us that the Father “did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all” (Rom. 8:32). Getting at the motivation behind Jesus’ arrival and death, Paul says, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). Urging the Ephesians believers to live a life of love, Paul gives them a model for what this should look like: “Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Finally, Paul tells the Corinthians, “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died” (2 Cor. 5:14).

Although this is breathless treatment of Paul’s writings, the picture remains clear: he primarily viewed Jesus’ death as a substitutionary atonement.
The Gospels

The Gospel narratives are littered with information about Jesus’ atonement. In each of the Gospels, the surrounding narrative acts like trusses supporting the main stage: Jesus’ death. New Testament scholar Martin Kahler describes the Gospels as “passion narratives with long introductions.” And Jesus makes it clear throughout the Gospels that he viewed his death as a sin-bearing substitute for humanity.

Jesus had a powerful conviction that his life and eventual death were a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Right before his death on the cross, Jesus told his disciples: “It is written: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors’; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment” (Lk. 22:37). Jesus here quotes Isaiah 53:12, the suffering servant passage mentioned earlier. As Jesus descended the mountain following the transfiguration, he said, “In the same way [like Elijah] the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands” (Matt. 17:12). In Mark 8:31, Jesus tells his disciples about his future death: “He…began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.” This, along with other statements, suggests that Jesus saw his own death as the primary reason he came.

More than this, Jesus saw his future death as a ransom. After turning the disciples’ view of greatness upon its head, Jesus said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk. 10:45). The word “ransom,” according to Edwin Hatch and Henry Redpath, “is used nearly 140 times in the Septuagint, usually with the thought of deliverance from some sort of bondage in exchange for the payment of compensation or the offering of a substitute.” Thus, we may conclude that Jesus saw his life as a ransom, freeing us from the bondage of sin and death.

Jesus also saw himself as our substitute. Towards the end of his life, Jesus commanded his disciples, “Love each other as I have loved you” (Jn. 15:12). To illustrate what this would look like, Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (Jn. 15:13). With his impending death on the cross in sight, there is little doubt that Jesus was thinking about the substitutionary death he was to undergo.

There are other indications that Jesus saw himself as a sacrificial substitute for the sins of others. While alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus agonized in prayer to the Father, “Abba, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mk. 14:36, emphasis added). The “cup” Jesus was referring to, was an Old Testament symbol of God’s wrath. This is strongly confirmed by the Wisdom literature and the prophetic writings. In the book of Job, a wicked person was said to “drink of the wrath of the Almighty” (Job 21:20). Similarly, God commanded Jeremiah: “Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it” (25:15-16). There is no doubt that Jesus was familiar with this Old Testament imagery. He must have known that the cup he was being offered contained the wine of God’s wrath. It is clear from his language at Gethsemane that Jesus recoiled at the thought of God’s wrath being poured out onto him. But Jesus knew that it was God’s loving purpose to save humanity and that the only way this was possible was through his sin-bearing death. So how could he say, “Father, save me from this hour”? “No,” Jesus said, “it was for this very reason I came.” Thus, Jesus steps out of the shadows of Gethsemane, resolute about his mission. Later that night, when a detachment came to arrest Jesus, Simon Peter drew his sword to defend Jesus. But Jesus commanded Peter to put it away, saying, “Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me? (Jn. 18:11).” John’s omission of Jesus’ agonized prayers at Gethsemane suggests that
Jesus knew that the cup would not be taken away from him. He was to drink the cup of wrath originally reserved for us.

To sum up, there is not one discordant voice among the Gospel writers. Together they speak of Jesus’ main mission: to die for the sins of the human race.

**General Epistles**

In our final treatment of Scripture, we will evaluate the New Testament writings that do not fall into the two previous categories.

Peter views Jesus’ death in many of the same categories expressed by other New Testament writers. Calling on this readers to live as “strangers” on the earth in “reverent fear,” he reminds them: “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed…but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). Peter explains the reason for and value of Jesus’ death: “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Pet. 3:18). Peter very much agrees with the other New Testament writers: Jesus died a substitutionary death.

Although we have already made a number of references to the book of Hebrews, we will cover the remaining texts in that letter about Jesus’ atonement. Set in the context of establishing Jesus’ divine nature, the author of Hebrews argues that Jesus is greater than the angels. The reasoning he provides is, “After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (Heb. 1:3b). The “purification for sins” he mentions must be a reference to Jesus’ death. Evidently, the author of Hebrews saw Jesus’ death as an act of purification for sins. Right after establishing Jesus’ divine nature, the author of Hebrews argues for Jesus’ incarnation: “Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor…suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (Heb. 2:9). There are two points of interest in this verse. The first is that Jesus came to earth to “taste death for everyone.” This points to the fact that Jesus’ central mission on earth was to die a substitutionary death. The second point of interest is that God himself came to earth as Jesus. This implies that God himself provided Jesus’ atoning death. Later on in his letter, the author of Hebrews argues for the supremacy of Jesus’ sacrificial death over the Old Testament atonement practice. The conclusion he draws is, “For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant” (Heb. 9:15). The author of Hebrews speaks of Jesus’ death as a ransom, but not in a way that aligns with the ransom theory’s understanding of it. Instead, the author of Hebrews sees Jesus’ death as ransom to God, to set humanity free from sins committed.

Lastly, John’s epistles and Revelation contain some of the clearest statements in the New Testament about Jesus’ death. While entreatling his audience to his audience to walk in light, John reasons with them: “[I]f we walk in the light…we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7). The imagery John uses here is easily traced back to the Old Testament atonement practice mentioned above. In perhaps the clearest text about the purpose of Jesus’ death, John tells his readers, “[Jesus] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn. 2:2). Reminding his audience why Jesus came, John tells them, “You know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin” (1 Jn. 3:5). Here John connects the purpose and possibility of Jesus’ atonement: to take away our sins by his sinless sacrifice. A few verses
later, John reveals God’s motive for sending Jesus: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” (1 Jn. 3:16). Jesus’ substitutionary death is the ultimate expression of God’s love.

Still more striking is the portrait of Jesus’ death in the book of Revelation. After introducing Jesus, John adds a revealing doxology: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood...to him be glory and power for ever and ever!” (Rev. 1:5-6). John saw Jesus’ blood as primarily an atoning sacrifice for sins. In fact, the association between Jesus and the Old Testament sacrificial victim is so strong that John commonly refers to him as “the Lamb” throughout his letter. At one point in John’s vision, Jesus is depicted as a slain Lamb standing on God’s throne, while the encircling the heavenly hosts sing:

You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased men for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation. (Rev. 5:9).

John depicts the main purpose of the Lamb’s blood as purchasing “men for God, from every tribe language and people and nation.” Later in John’s vision the same multitude is described standing before the enthroned Lamb. One of the elders announces, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14). Clearly, the “robes made white in the Lamb’s blood” are a reference to Jesus’ blood cleansing us from our sins.

All in all, our brief survey of Scripture has left us with a harmony of voices that singularly affirm the central theme of the atonement: Jesus came to die a substitutionary death for humanity. Although other themes add richness and depth to our understanding of the atonement, they in no way replace the sin-bearing sense that defines it.

Harmonizing Scripture’s Voice With a Theory of the Atonement

Now that we have consulted Scripture in our discussion, let’s take another pass at the major theories of the atonement. This time, however, we will try to harmonize each of the three major theories with our findings from Scripture.

Moral Influence Theory

From what we have gathered so far, Scripture often speaks of the cross as God’s ultimate display of love. Because of this, it is no wonder that some theologians have found its atoning value there. To advocates of the moral influence theory, the power of the cross does not lie in its
objective, sin-bearing transaction, but in its subjective, inspiring power. Yet there are three reasons the moral influence theory cannot be the principal way of understanding the atonement.

First, champions of the moral influence theory selectively employ passages of Scripture that undergird their theory and reject texts that are incompatible with it. For instance, Rashdall considered Jesus’ ransom saying (Mk. 10:45) to be a “doctrinally coloured insertion.”35 Similarly, Rashdall regards Jesus’ last supper promise about the blood of the new covenant and the forgiveness of sins as a later insertion. His reasoning? “Our Lord never taught that his death was necessary for the forgiveness of sins.”36 This sort of thinking, John Stott observes, “is a notable example of circular reasoning.”37 According to Stott, Rashdall is guilty of assuming what he wishes to prove.38 Stott’s critique of Rashdall becomes even more apparent in other, more candid statements. For example, Rashdall thinks that our commitment to biblical inspiration must not prevent us from “boldly rejecting any formulae which…seem to say that sin cannot be forgiven without a vicarious sacrifice.”39 In other words, he is proposing that we first construct our view of the atonement and then virulently defend it against all objections. Thus, we should maintain that Paul corrupted the pure message of Jesus due to the doctrinally tainting influence of Isaiah 53.

Secondly, the moral influence theory is flawed in its central emphasis. As mentioned in the section above, the moral influence theory focuses on God’s love for humanity. The driving force behind the atonement was to demonstrate God’s love to the human race and to elicit our responsive love. With this, Scripture is in wholehearted agreement. Jesus’ entrance in the world and his death were a supreme demonstration of God’s love for humanity (1 Jn. 3:16; Rom. 5:8; Eph. 5:2). Further, Jesus’ proclamation of love, issuing from the cross, inspires within us a new capability to love. John tells us “We love because he first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19). So far, then, we are in agreement. But there is one question that remains unanswered: In what way does the cross display God’s love for humanity? Granted, true love must be self-giving. But without purpose, an otherwise self-giving act of love would be nothing more than foolishness. Take the example of being trapped in a burning building. If you ran into a burning building in order to rescue me and did so successfully, but in the process lost your own life, then I would consider your actions to be a demonstration of your love. But if you and I were standing outside of an empty burning building and I turned to you and said, “I want you to show you how much I love you,” and then ran into the burning building, you would think that I was mentally unstable or plainly foolish. Likewise, Jesus’ death cannot be seen as an act of love unless he gave up his life in order to rescue us. As John Stott puts it: “His death must be seen to have had an objective before it can have an appeal.”40 And the objective behind the cross is clear articulated by Scripture: Jesus died to bear the sins of humanity. The cross can be understood as an act of love inssofar as it is understood to be a simultaneous act of justice.

Thirdly, the moral influence theory fails to consider the Bible’s grave prognosis for sin’s consequences. To quote Anselm’s words against proponents of the moral influence theory, “[Y]ou have not yet considered the seriousness of sin.” Developed during the Enlightenment, advocates of the moral influence theory had boundless confidence in human reason and ability, but they lacked the profound biblical understanding of humanity’s rebellion against God and the indispensable necessity of providing satisfaction to God for sin’s consequences.41 James Orr provides an interesting insight about Abelard’s view of the atonement “[H]is view of the atonement is defective precisely on the side on which Anselm was strong,”42 namely, his view of sin and satisfaction.

Fully aware of these arguments, advocates of the moral influence theory believe that they still have the last word. Jesus, they would say, taught forgiveness without the need for atonement, based solely upon the person’s repentance. In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax gatherer,
the latter beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Lk. 18:9-14) and was immediately justified. And in the parable of the lost son, the father took back his repentant son without any sort of punishment (Lk. 15:11-24). In both of these parables, God demonstrates his forgiveness without any mention of an atoning sacrifice.

Two responses can be furnished. First of all, parables are not meant to provide a point-by-point correspondence between the story and the message. Using the same line of reasoning, Jesus is not mentioned in these parables, either. Does that suggest, then, that he is also unnecessary for our forgiveness? Scripture would emphatically answer “No.” We must keep in mind that parables are illustrative stories that typically convey a single moral lesson.

Secondly, both of these parables contain characters that Jesus deliberately contrasts. There are two worshippers in the temple—the self-righteous Pharisee and the humble tax gatherer—and two servants in the father’s household—the lost but ultimately repentant son and the righteous but prideful son. According to Stott, these parables “highlight, through contrast, the condition of forgiveness, not its ground.” Stated differently, these parables tell us what we need (to be forgiven) without telling us how the need is met.

At the end of the day, Scripture is the final arbiter for determining how we should understand the atonement. Although Scripture affirms God’s love as a driving motivation for Jesus’ incarnation and death, it equally affirms the satisfaction of his divine justice. Abelard wrongly tries to separate these two and render them mutually exclusive. Yet Scripture affirms both motivations as operative in the cross. To quote the words of Paul, God’s motive in sending Jesus was “to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). Brought together by one single act, God put his unfailing love and uncompromising justice on display.

To conclude, then, Jesus’ appearance on earth and his death on the cross represent an unparalleled revelation of God’s love for humanity. Anselm and Abelard are not divided on this point. In fact, it could be said that Anselm should have laid a heavier emphasis upon God’s love. But ultimately, Abelard was mistaken in denying the substitutionary nature of the cross. Having reconsidered the moral influence theory, we find that substitutionary atonement prevails as the primary way to understand Jesus’ death.

Ransom Theory

Next, we turn to reevaluate the ransom theory. Like the moral influence theory, there is much to commend the ransom theory. According to the ransom theory, God triumphed over Satan and the forces of evil through the cross. Substitutionary atonement affirms this fact. Jesus achieved a victory over evil when he gave his life as a ransom. Yet from this point on, the two theories dramatically diverge. According to the substitution theory, the ransom was paid to fulfill the requirements of God’s justice, not to Satan.

First of all, if Christ’s death had been nothing more than a ransom payment to Satan, then the curse of the law would not have been lifted from humanity. Scripture is clear about this fact. Paul tells the Galatian believers: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree’” (Gal. 3:13). Again he says, “When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (Gal. 4:4-5). These verses indicate that a major aspect of Jesus’ mission was to redeem humanity from the law’s curse.
And since God is the one who furnished the law, he is also the one to whom the debt must be paid for its violation. Therefore, Jesus’ death must have been rendered to God. Otherwise, humanity would not have been fully redeemed.

Additionally, much of what the ransom theory claims hinges upon the belief that Satan has rightful possession of the human race. Surprisingly, some passages of Scripture seem to verify this claim. First John tells us, “We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one” (1 Jn. 5:19). If this really means that the evil one has exclusive rights to humanity, then God must have paid a ransom to him. Yet, other texts seem to suggest that God is the sole owner of the world and its inhabitants. For example, the psalmist writes, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (Psa. 42:1). This passage plainly states that God is the rightful possessor of the earth and all its inhabitants. Who, then, is the rightful owner of the human race? The answer lies in the context of John’s letter. Earlier in his letter, John warns his readers: “Do not love the world or anything in the world...For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world” (1 Jn. 2:15-16). Here, John explains what he means by the term “world”: the cravings of sinful man, the lust of the eyes, and the boasting of what someone has or does. The “world” refers to a system of values Satan uses to ensnare humanity. Thus, when John says that the world is controlled by the evil one, he is not suggesting Satan’s ownership of the human race. Properly understood, then, God is the rightful owner of humanity, not Satan.

This does not mean, however, that the evil one is incapable of enslaving the human race. His very name reveals the nature of his strategy. The name Satan literally means the “accuser,” and according to the Bible, the evil one induces us to sin and then immediately lays accusations against us. Having succeeded in this, he is able to enslave us to sin and the fear of death.

But, ultimately, it was because of Jesus’ substitutionary death that we were liberated from being enslaved to both sin and the fear of death. 1) First of all, Jesus’ death emancipates us from our slavery to sin. While contrasting our “old self” to our “new life” in Christ, Paul reminds the Romans believers: “For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin” (Rom. 6:6-7). The connection is clear: we have been freed from the slavery of sin because our “old self” was crucified with Christ. Colossians 2:13-15 is perhaps the most important passage in the New Testament, regarding Jesus’ victory over sin:

He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Paul here brings two aspects of Jesus’ saving work together: the forgiveness of sins and the cosmic overthrow of evil powers. The “written code” that has been cancelled is a reference to a signed confession of indebtedness, which stood as a perpetual witness against us. Paul indicates that God has cancelled the written code by “nailing it to the cross.” This is a clear allusion to the tablet that was fixed over a crucified person’s head, stating his crime. Of course, it was our crimes that were placed on Jesus’ written code, not his. Thus, Paul’s first point: God frees us from our bankruptcy by paying our debts through the cross. Placed side-by-side with the concept of forgiveness, Paul indicates that the cross also provided a victory over evil “powers and authorities.” Through the cross, God permanently “disarmed” the evil one of his accusations against God’s character. And he also broke the bondage of sin, whereby Satan is able to enslave humanity. In doing these things, God has dismantled his enemy’s armaments
and vanquished him. It is important to notice, however, that both the forgiveness of sins and the triumph over evil happened together. It was by his payment of our debt that he was able to overthrow the evil powers and authorities. 2) Secondly, the substitutionary death of Jesus has set us free from the fear of death’s grip upon us. This is why Paul is able to taunt death: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:55-57). Christ’s death has ensured our eternal life, thus triumphing over death’s grip on humanity. The author of Hebrews adds, “[H]e too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (2:14-15). It was Christ’s victory over death that undermined the devil’s power to enslave us to fear.

In sum, Christ’s death was indeed God’s triumph over the evil one, but only because it was a substitutionary death. The ransom theory helps expand our understanding of the boundless implications of the cross. By itself, however, the ransom theory is inadequate to explain how we have been freed from the curse of the law. Further, it wrongly attributes ownership of the human race to the evil one.

**Substitution Theory**

Although the two theories above describe certain aspect of Jesus’ death, neither one can making sense of all that Scripture has to say about the atonement. Substitutionary atonement alone possesses this explanatory power. Furthermore, it incorporates both the loving and victorious natures of the atonement emphasized by the other two theories.

While the substitution theory corresponds with Scripture’s view of the atonement, it also coheres with other essential doctrines. First, it preserves the biblical teaching of total depravity. If we possessed the ability to make ourselves right before God, then Jesus needlessly died. Second, substitutionary atonement fits with the biblical theme of God’s righteous judgment. Unlike the moral influence theory, which seeks to expunge God’s wrath from the Bible, the substitution theory understands Jesus’ death to be the satisfaction of it. Finally, substitutionary atonement is crucial for understanding the New Testament teaching of law verses grace. According to the substitution theory, Jesus’ death lifted the curse of the law, which enables believers to be freed from the law. Thus, the New Testament declares that believers in Christ are no longer under law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14). Consequently, the substitution theory not only coheres with these other major doctrines, in some cases it is the key to understanding them.

Finally, although there is much to commend Anselm’s formulation of the substitution theory, there are aspects of it that are deficient. First of all, Anselm speculates about God’s motive for the atonement. In *Cur Deus Homo*, he argues that some humans must be saved in order to offset the loss of fallen angels. Therefore, the atonement was necessary. Although this follows Anselm’s purpose of arguing for the logical necessity of the atonement, it lacks biblical support. Secondly, even though Anselm mentions God’s compassion as a characteristic of the atonement, it is largely absent from his formulation of it. Meanwhile, Scripture insists that God’s mercy was a driving motive for the atonement. Incidentally, Anselm’s lack of emphasis upon God’s mercy happens to be the biblically based motive for the atonement.

In sum, the substitution theory is the primary way to understand the atonement. The sheer volume of Scripture devoted to the atonement, clearly portrays it as a sin-bearing, substitutionary death. Moreover, the substitution theory is in harmony with other major doctrines...
and in some cases is essential to our understanding of them. And finally, the other major theories of the atonement amplify our understanding of the substitution theory, yet they incapable of taking its place as the primary view of the atonement.

**Common Objections to the Atonement**

Now that we have set a biblical foundation for substitutionary atonement, we will turn out attention to some common objections raised against it.

*Why can’t God just forgive without the Atonement?*

For a lot of people, the idea that Jesus died to forgive humanity’s sins does not make sense. When presented with the cross’ meaning, people typically ask, “Why did Jesus have to die? Why couldn’t God just forgive us?” To many, the Christian God reminds them of one of the vengeful gods in primitive religions that need to be appeased by human sacrifice. To explain the necessity of Jesus’ substitutionary death, Timothy Keller uses an economic example:

> “Imagine someone borrows your car, and as he backs out of the driveway he strikes a gate, knocking it down along with part of a wall. Your property insurance doesn’t cover the gate and garden wall. What can you do?”

There are essentially two options. The first would be to demand that this person pay for the damages. The second is to absorb the cost of the damage and to release the person of any responsibility. Of course, there may be a middle-of-the-road solution in which you both share the payment. But in all of these options, someone must bear the cost of the damage. Either you or the other person absorbs the cost for what he did. But the debt does not simply go away or vanish into thin air. Thus, real forgiveness requires costly suffering.

Likewise, when we commit acts of moral-wrongdoing, God has been personally damaged. And although we may be remorseful for our actions, simply telling God “I’m sorry” does not undo the damage that has been done. Forgiveness means absorbing the damage of someone else’s sin, which means experiencing personal suffering and loss. Thus, God absorbed the cost of our sin’s damage through the suffering Jesus’ experienced on the cross.

*The Atonement Contradicts Jesus’ Teaching About Forgiveness*

Some critics of substitutionary atonement think that its vengeful nature contradicts Jesus’ own teaching of peace and love. To suggest, then, that God requires punishment before offering forgiveness depicts him as a hypocrite. Thus, the vengeful nature of the atonement must be rejected. Substitutionary atonement, Stuart Murray Williams suggests, “is inherently violent and contravenes central aspects of the message of Jesus.” Others like Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, express their objection more forcefully: “If the cross is a personal act of violence
perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and not to repay evil with evil.”

But these objections fail to understand a certain aspect of God’s nature, his justice. The Bible teaches that God bears the unique responsibility of administering justice in the universe. To simply ignore moral wrongdoing would destroy the moral fabric of the universe—the distinction between right and wrong. This is the reason why God cannot simply overlook evil. He must punish moral wrongdoing.

Furthermore, God’s ultimate justice serves as the basis for the Bible’s command not to repay evil for evil. It is God’s role to judge evil. While talking to persecuted believers, Peter commands them: “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing” (1 Pet. 3:9). And yet, in nearly the same breath he gives them this consolation: “But they [those whom persecute you] will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead” (1 Pet. 4:5). In another place, Paul tells the Roman believers: ‘Do not repay anyone evil for evil…Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord’ (Rom. 12:17-19). Part of our motivation to overlook evil and the solace we have that evil will not go on unpunished, is that God is just and will ultimately avenge evil.

Finally, unlike human beings God is morally perfect. Often, when somebody does something wrong against us, we are aware of our own contribution of wrongdoing in the situation. Or, we are aware that we have wronged others on numerous other occasions. And in some cases, we may have even wronged the person who has presently wronging us. But in the case of God, there is no such element of moral imperfection to minimize our moral wrongdoing.

**Cosmic Child Abuse**

Other critics object that substitutionary atonement represents a type of “divine child abuse.” Despite their charged language, it is easy to picture what they are trying to describe. The Father is drunk with anger and is stampeding through the house looking for us so that he can vent his uncontrollable rage. We of course are hiding, afraid, hoping he will go away. Just as the Father sees us, he rushes toward us. But the Son jumps in front of us, and the Father beats him until his wrath has been satisfied and he has nothing left for us. It is easy to envision the cross this way. In fact, many well-meaning followers of God tend to envision the cross this way. But to see the atonement this way would be a gross misunderstanding of God’s character.

It is important to remember that the Christian faith has always understood Jesus to be God. God did not inflict pain on someone else. Rather, on the cross he absorbed the pain, violence, and evil of the world into himself. While speaking to his close followers right before his death, Jesus said: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (Jn. 10:11; 17-18). Or again, while speaking to the multitudes, Jesus declared: “Whatever the Father does the Son also does” (Jn. 5:19). And finally, on another occasion, Jesus said: “Now my heart is troubled. [As he looked forward to his death on the cross] What shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!” (Jn. 12:27-28) The clear picture that emerges from Scripture is that Jesus was not the unfortunate victim of the angry Father. Rather, the Father and the Son were working in concert through the cross to pay for human sin. There is no division of will between the Father and the Son.
Another way to understand this concept is through the illustration of “the righteous judge.” There was once a righteous judge who lived in a small rural province. He was renowned for his pursuit of justice and integrity. Whenever someone stole, restitution was required. When a life was taken, a life was required.

On one day, the judge’s bailiff gave him a court docket containing the list of cases he would hear for that day. When the judge opened it up, the first case on the list was murder.

When the double doors of the courtroom swung open, the judge looked up and saw the silhouette of the defendant being escorted into the courtroom. As the defendant came into the light, the judge was stunned to see that it was his son.

When the case went to trial, the evidence was overwhelming. Both physical and eyewitness evidence was presented against the judge’s son. By the end of the trial, it was clear that his son was guilty without shadow of a doubt.

Meanwhile, the controversy surrounding this case has brought the whole town out. In the background, there was rumbling among the people in the community. Many of them were interested to see what the judge would do. On the one hand, he loved his son and did not want him to be punished. But on the other hand, as a judge he was obligated maintain justice.

At the close of the trial, after all the evidence was laid out, after the closing arguments were given, the judge adjourned for twenty minutes. It was tense in the courtroom. Everyone eagerly awaited the judge’s the pronouncement. When the judge reemerged from his chamber, he entered the courtroom and sat down. Silence filled the air.

After a long pause, the judge pronounced the verdict: “The defendant is guilty as charged… And the sentence is death.” As soon as the judge finished speaking, the courtroom exploded with talk.

Meanwhile, the judge stood up and took his robe off. When he did this, conversation came to an abrupt halt. Everyone’s attention was fixed upon the judge. He broke the silence by saying to his son, “Instead of you serving this sentence, I will take the punishment upon you deserve. I will die in your place.” In this illustration, the father represents both judge and scapegoat. Likewise, Jesus represented both the “just and the justifier” (Rom. 3:26).

**Summary**

To sum up, then, Scripture clearly speaks of the atonement as a sin-bearing, substitutionary death. Although alternate theories of the atonement compliment and further enrich our understanding of the atonement, they are incapable of taking substitution theory’s place as the central theme of the atonement.

To bring King Solomon’s words back to mind, “There is nothing new under the sun.” The promise to repaint the atonement is nothing more than a fabrication of past efforts to deny its substitutionary nature. One day, the popularity of this attempt will pass away and a new one will emerge to take its place. But our assurance of the meaning and purpose of the atonement is fixed. This is because, as Isaiah observes, “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isa. 40:8).
Footnotes


2 Peter Abelard, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans 3:26; 5:5


5 Ibid., 154.


7 Ibid., 155.

8 Origen, Commentary on Matthew 13:28.

9 Ibid.

10 Gregory of Nyssa, Great Catechism 22.

11 Gregory the Great, Morals of Job 33.15.

12 Augustine, De trinitate 13.12.


15 Anslem, Cur Deus Homo 1.7


17 Anslem, Cur Deus Homo 1.11.

18 Erickson, Christian Theology, 798.


20 Anslem, Cur Deus Homo 1.12

21 Ibid., 1.16-18.

22 Ibid., 2.8

23 Ibid., 2.10.


27 Ibid., 274.

28 Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 137.


31 Ibid., 145-148.

32 Ibid., 148.


36 Ibid., 45.


38 Ibid., 215.


41 Ibid., 215.


46 Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* 1.18


48 Ibid., 187.
Stuart Murray Williams, ‘Stuart Murray Williams on the Lost Message of Jesus: A Speech at the Debate on Steve Chalke’s Book The Lost Message of Jesus’
http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/node/233

Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, The Lost message of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182-183.