

A Critique of Penal Substitution Atonement Theory
and Its Influence on the American Death Penalty

by

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Abstract

“A CRITIQUE OF PENAL SUBSTITUTION ATONEMENT THEORY AND ITS
INFLUENCE ON THE AMERICAN DEATH PENALTY”

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Project under the direction of Professor Robert MacSwain

This thesis examines Christian atonement theology and how it relates to the American prison system, especially the death penalty. In particular, it explores the ways that penal substitution theory has influenced the development of the American prison system. It also focuses on the ways that penal substitution theory has been influenced by secular penal theory and legal philosophy.

My thesis is that the Christian approach to the American prison system and the death penalty in particular should be driven by an atonement theology derived primarily from narrative Christus Victor theory rather than penal substitution theory. Based upon scripture and theologians from the early through the contemporary church, I explore the implications of this atonement theology on the Christian response to the American system of mass incarceration, especially with regards to the practice of death penalty.

This thesis shows that the satisfaction family of atonement theories is deeply flawed, and, to some extent, the moral influence family of atonement theories is flawed as well. As a basis for my argument, I do an in-depth study of the Suffering Servant and messiahship traditions. I then show that the New Testament writers primarily looked to these two traditions to understand their experience with Jesus Christ and then to witness to his atoning life, death, and resurrection. These two traditions and how they are appropriated by the New Testament writers form the basis of my critique of satisfaction and moral influence theories of the atonement in favor of narrative Christus Victor.

This thesis argues that, especially since Anselm proposed his satisfaction theory, atonement theories have powerfully shaped individual, communal, and societal responses to wrongdoing. I show that the satisfaction and moral influence theories of atonement developed at the same time that western legal and penal philosophies and practices were developing. These legal and penal philosophies and atonement theories have had a great impact upon each other and, at times, have even been dependent upon each other. I show that penal substitution theory has provided the ideological justification for the development of the retributivist policies of the American prison system. I argue in favor of a restorative and nonviolent response to wrongdoing based upon the ancient Christian sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist, and Reconciliation and the narrative Christus Victor theology embodied in these practices.

A primary goal of this thesis is for it to be a resource to pastors, in both parish and prison settings, as they reflect on preaching the cross in American society. It will do so by showing both that the penal substitution theology, which has underpinned the death penalty and the American system of mass incarceration, is unhealthy and deeply flawed and that retributivist penal philosophy has influenced what has become the dominant atonement theology of the western church. A better approach is urgently needed, and to find it Christians need look no further than the writings of the New Testament and sacramental practices of the church. This thesis endeavors to do just that.

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Introduction

We know that no religion is immune from forms of individual delusion or ideological extremism...But there is another temptation that we must especially guard against: the simplistic reductionism which sees only good or evil; or, if you will, the righteous and sinners...We know that in the attempt to be freed of the enemy from without, we can be tempted to feed the enemy within. To imitate the hatred and violence of tyrants and murderers is the best way to take their place. Our response must instead be hope and healing, peace and justice...I am convinced that [the global abolition of the death penalty] is best, since every life is sacred, every person is endowed with an inalienable dignity, and society can only benefit from the rehabilitation of those convicted of crimes...I also offer encouragement to all those who are convinced that a just and necessary punishment must never exclude the dimension of hope and the goal of rehabilitation.

—Pope Francis, Speech Before U.S. Congress, September 24, 2015

This thesis will explore the American prison system, especially the death penalty, and how it relates to Christian atonement theology. In particular, it will examine the ways that penal substitution theory has influenced the development of the American prison system. It will also explore the ways that penal substitution theory has been influenced by secular penal theory and legal philosophy. My thesis is that the Christian approach to the American prison system and the death penalty in particular should be driven by a new atonement theology derived primarily from narrative Christus Victor theory of the atonement rather than penal substitution theory.¹

¹ See J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011). Weaver is Professor Emeritus at Bluffton University where he taught for 31 years. He continues as editor of The C. Henry Smith Series. His many books, articles, and chapters in edited books as well as speaking engagements address a variety of topics related to nonviolence, violence in traditional theology, atonement theology, the character of God, violence in society, and Anabaptist history and theology.

The Power of Theology as Ideology

In his book, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence, and the Rhetoric of Salvation*, Timothy Gorringer looks at the way atonement theories change in response to changing accounts of criminal law. Gorringer also asks about the validity of presuppositions behind satisfaction theory, and, in particular, the concept of expiation. He then goes on to show how expiation and retribution have been read together in Christian tradition. Finally, he asks the question that is of ultimate interest in this paper: How should Christian theology of the atonement bear on penal thinking?²

Gorringer points out that in the eighteenth century John Fletcher and his mentor, John Wesley, were both clergymen who were concerned about the poor. What was it then, Gorringer asks, that prevented them from seeing that the law of their time was unjust? How was it that these Christian leaders could see people with hopeless backgrounds, which they perfectly understood, go to the gallows for offenses that were trivial and not violent without exerting themselves to have the sentence commuted?³ Moreover, it was not as if questions about the law, especially the use of the death penalty, had not been raised. So how was it that the question of whether the law might be wrong, or even evil, did not arise for these good Christian people? “How could they come away from scenes of judicial murder feeling that this was ‘the most blessed day of their

² Timothy Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence and the Rhetoric of Salvation*, Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion, no. 9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7. The author of many books on the interaction between theology and public policy, Gorringer taught in India, Oxford and St Andrews before taking up his current position as Professor of Theological Studies at Exeter University. I heavily rely upon this book at various points in this thesis because it is so well researched and documented in its study of both atonement theology and retributivist approaches to criminal justice.

³ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 4.

lives'?"⁴ By and large the question of the justness or unjustness of the law was not ever a concern of these great theologians. The one concern for these Christian leaders, as it is for many today, was that the condemned repented of his sins.

Gorringe sees three reasons for this failure. For one, there are social blindfolds in society. In eighteenth century England, Bishops and Archbishops were part of the overall power structure, and they gave the system and the rulers legitimacy. The second reason for the failure is the idealist character of western theology. Idealism functions to direct attention away from the messiness and injustice of ordinary life to 'eternal' realities and truths. Rather than seeing the gospel as concerning this world, idealist theology encourages the renunciation of the world.⁵

The last reason for the failure, and most important, is the satisfaction theory of the atonement, which forms the very heart of theology in the western church to this day. Satisfaction theory is present in church teaching and worship. It continues to be taught in the prayers and worship of the Church, such as in the Eucharistic Prayer of Rite 1 of *The Book of Common Prayer*, which states that on the cross, Christ made a "full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world." This language draws on legal ideas to describe Christ's atonement in terms of a transaction that satisfies the breaking of divine law.

All theology is ideology that promotes certain particular social interests.⁶ Christian theology was the most potent form of ideology in the West for at least one

⁴ Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance*, 5.

⁵ Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance*, 6.

⁶ Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance*, 7.

thousand years up to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is still ideologically important today. Satisfaction theory both is influenced by and influences penal thinking. Read from a satisfaction theory perspective, the crucifixion reinforces retributive thinking. In this mindset, sin or crime cannot be dealt with in any other way than retributive punishment.

Satisfaction theory is still pervasive in the church not only through the work of theologians but also through the cross in art, hymnody, liturgy. All of these provide a “didactic theater through which the onlooker is taught what to feel, how to react, which sentiments are called for.”⁷ It is extremely complex to try to determine the way that ideology influences practice and vice versa with regards to prisons at any given moment. “In both mentalities and sensibilities an image of judicial murder, the cross, bestrode Western culture from the eleventh to the eighteenth centuries. How did this bear on understandings of penality?”⁸ Satisfaction theory, expressed in both art and liturgy and intellectual discourse has functioned as myth. Myth bears cultural meaning, safeguards morality, and expresses, enhances, and codifies belief.⁹

It is of utmost importance to continue the work of critiquing and providing an alternative to satisfaction theory, not least because of the impact it is having on culture: “It is no accident that the new retributivism of current penal policy has gone along with the rise of Christian fundamentalism, especially in the United States.”¹⁰ It is not an

⁷ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 8.

⁸ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 10.

⁹ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 10.

¹⁰ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 29.

overstatement to say that satisfaction theory has led to the development of prisons as places where criminals are sent to make atonement through retributive punishment.

We need to reread the foundational texts in order to critique these attitudes and participate in the reshaping of the goals and practices of the criminal justice system. The following chapters will do just that by drawing on the resources of scripture, atonement theories throughout the church's history, contemporary theologians, and scholars of prison philosophy and penal substitution theory to argue against penal substitution theory and in favor of a nonviolent restorative approach to atonement theology. The final chapter will draw on the sacramental practices of the church for a vision based on this atonement theology of a Christian response to the death penalty. A primary resource for this work will be my ministry on Georgia's death row over the past sixteen years and the Christian community centered on death row that includes inmates, their families and friends, their pastors, their lawyers, and other advocates.

What is Atonement Theology?

Before exploring the relationship between Christian atonement theology and secular penal theory and legal philosophy, it is important to define what atonement theology is and from where in scripture, tradition, and the present experience of the church it is derived. According to the *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, "atonement" derives from "the combination 'at + one + ment' in Middle English, where it carried the sense of reconciliation. In doctrinal statements in the Christian tradition, it typically denotes Jesus' sacrifice on the cross: 'Christ's death for us.' In biblical

materials, however, the concept of ‘atonement’ refers more broadly to various means by which particular persons (or humanity) are restored to right relationship with God.”¹¹

This thesis will go beyond traditional doctrine of Christ’s atonement, which focuses on his death, arguing that his life and resurrection are also essential to any Christian atonement theology. This thesis assumes that the traditional doctrine of the early Christian Fathers and the unified Church councils is an authoritative and revelatory source. As a work of theology, though, it will not be restrained from also critiquing traditional and contemporary church doctrines. In particular, it will assume that the whole life of Christ, “climaxed by his death and resurrection, is the work of atonement. The cross has a central, but not exclusive, place in the atoning work of Christ. From baptism on, Jesus was overcoming the power of sin.”¹²

The catechism of *The Book of Common Prayer* provides a doctrinal point of departure through its definition of key concepts that are relevant to the exploration of atonement theology. In this catechism, sin is defined as “the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation.” Sin has power over us because “we lose our liberty when our relationship with God is distorted.” Redemption is “the act of God which sets us free from the power of evil, sin, and death.” God prepared us for redemption by sending “the prophets to call us back to himself, to show us the need for redemption, and to announce the coming of the Messiah.” The Messiah, or Christ, is Jesus of Nazareth, the only Son of

¹¹ Joel B. Green, *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: A-C Volume 1* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 344-345.

¹² Robert E. Burks, “Atonement/Expiation in the New Testament”, *The Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 75.

God, the “one sent by God to free us from the power of sin, so that with the help of God, we may live in harmony with God, within ourselves, with our neighbors, and with all creation.” Jesus took our human nature, “so that in him human beings might be adopted as children of God, and be made heirs of God’s kingdom.” The great importance of Jesus’ suffering and death is that “by his obedience, even to suffering and death, Jesus made the offering which we could not make; in him we are freed from the power of sin and reconciled to God.”¹³ The significance of Jesus’ resurrection is that by his resurrection, “Jesus overcame death and opened for us the way of eternal life.” We can share in Christ’s victory over sin, suffering, and death when we are “baptized into the New Covenant and become living members of Christ.” The New Covenant “is the new relationship with God given by Jesus Christ, the Messiah, to the apostles; and, through them, to all who believe in him.” In the New Covenant, “Christ promised to bring us into the kingdom of God and give us life in all of its fullness.” The response that Christ requires of us is “to believe in him and to keep his commandments.” His commandments are to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and the great commandment. And the second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”¹⁴

N.T. Wright states that from a Christian perspective the atonement “was and is the stunning, towering achievement by which evil itself was defeated so that God’s new age

¹³ On the face of it, this statement seems to support penal substitution theory, which this thesis argues against. Yet what is commended here is Jesus’ obedience, not his suffering and death. Moreover, “offering which we could not make” refers to his unique sacrifice that shapes the lives of all Christians.

¹⁴ Citations from *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York, NY: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1979), 848-51.

could begin.”¹⁵ This defeat of evil that inaugurated “God’s new age” comes through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Wright points out that all theories of the atonement are abstractions from the real events that they refer to. “The events—the flesh-and-blood, time and space happenings—are the reality which the theories are trying to understand but cannot replace.”¹⁶ These are historical events that happened two thousand years ago in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They are not limited to biblical and historical events however. They are also the events of the present time within the Christian community, particularly celebrations of the sacraments of the Church. For example, the Eucharist “repeats the meal Jesus gave as his own interpretation of his death.”¹⁷ In *The Book of Common Prayer*’s “The Reconciliation of a Penitent”¹⁸, the penitent receives the forgiveness of the resurrected Christ. In these present-day events Christ defeats evil “so that God’s new age” can begin. The conclusion of this thesis will draw on the sacraments, particularly Baptism, Eucharist, and Reconciliation as a way of approaching atonement theology and

¹⁵ N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 156.

¹⁶ Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 94.

¹⁷ Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 94.

¹⁸ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 447. Although *The Book of Common Prayer* refers to this as a “sacramental rite,” as distinguished from Eucharist and Baptism, which are called “sacraments”, I interpret this distinction as a way of saying that Eucharist and Baptism are the two that are required of *all* Christians. The other five sacraments of the church are referred to as “sacramental rites,” as a way of reflecting that they are not required of all Christians, and some, such as ordination, do not even apply to all Christians. The distinction between “sacrament” and “sacramental rite” is also a way of indicating that the five “sacramental rites” are based upon the two “sacraments.” To say that something is a “sacramental rite,” though, is not to say that it is any less sacramental than Baptism or Eucharist for the person who is called to practice the sacramental rite, such as “The Reconciliation of a Penitent.” Therefore, throughout the rest of this thesis I will refer to the sacramental rite of “The Reconciliation of a Penitent” as the sacrament of Reconciliation because the meaning of the two terms is, in my view, the same, save that a “sacramental rite” is not required of all Christians.

prison philosophy. It will be shown that sacramental practices, which can be understood as immediate experiences of Christ's atonement, are not retributive and punitive in their response to wrongdoing but restorative and reconciliatory.

Theories of the atonement must have an eschatological dimension, interpreting events in the past to make claims on the present and the future. In atonement theology, God saves the world through activity in human history. "That is to say, what is achieved on the cross is not a timeless, abstract accomplishment located, if anywhere, among Plato's forms, well away from the reality of space-time history." It is nothing less than "the promise that what God accomplished on Calvary will be fully and finally implemented."¹⁹

An assumption of this thesis is that all valid theories of the atonement must fundamentally be both personal and political. The atonement of Christ is personal because as the believer accepts all that was done for her in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus she is transformed and empowered through the Holy Spirit to live the liberated and abundant life of Christ. Forgiveness plays an important role in this personal dimension of atonement as the believer is liberated from shame and guilt and able to live the redeemed life of God.

Atonement is political and social because this abundant life offered in Christ comes through citizenship in the Kingdom of God, the Christian community of discipleship. To say that Jesus is the Messiah is a political statement, meaning that he is the head of the Christian community of which the believer is a part. To say that he is the

¹⁹ Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 95-96.

Messiah is to say that he is the King to whom all allegiance is ultimately due. Atonement for the believer comes through solidarity and commitment to him as Lord and Savior as one pledges allegiance to his kingdom over any other.

The political power of this King and his kingdom is unique. In the best known of the “atonement” passages from the gospels, Mark 10:35-45, Jesus describes the nature of his political power and that of the community of his followers. In this story James and John ask if they may sit on either side of Jesus in his kingly power. Jesus responds to this political question with a political answer: “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

By stating that he gives his life as “a ransom for many” Jesus, as described by Mark, is drawing a direct connection between the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 and himself. Isaiah’s Suffering Servant gives meaning to the personal and political dimensions of Christ’s atonement. In connecting himself to the Suffering Servant, Jesus is proclaiming that his ultimate vocation to reconcile humanity with one another and with God is rooted in sacrificial self-offering, which will characterize his Kingdom. “This evocation of Isaiah 53 (exactly, in fact, as in Isaiah 40-55 as a whole!) sits in the middle of the *political analysis of empire* and subverts it by showing how all the traditions of

Israel, the people through whom God would address and solve the problem of the world's evil, come to a point which overturns Babylon and its ways."²⁰

This thesis will assume that an atonement theory is incomplete if it only offers the personal dimension that liberates, transforms, and reconciles the believer to God without the political dimension. It is also incomplete if it only describes the political dimension of the Christian community that conquers evil through suffering love without the personal dimension. I will return to my argument for an atonement theology that is balanced between political and the personal through narrative Christus Victor theory in Chapter 2.

There are many images, metaphors, and concepts in the Bible, particularly the New Testament, upon which atonement theories have been based. Indeed, as David Brown puts it, the New Testament authors approached the Old Testament as a "treasure-trove of potential metaphors, employed to highlight, now in one way, now in another, what the authors saw as the indispensable role of Christ in human salvation."²¹ I will discuss many of these ideas in the upcoming chapters. I have found that doing work in the area of atonement is a treacherous task for a theologian because of the low degree of unanimity among Christians on this doctrine compared to other doctrines. Whereas societal pressures forced the Early Church to define other doctrines, even developing the Creeds to do so, this was not the case with atonement.²² For this reason, even today, two

²⁰ Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 95-98.

²¹ David Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, edited by Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 280. Brown serves as Professor of Theology, Aesthetics and Culture in the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts and as Wardlaw Professor at St Mary's College, University of St Andrews. In this essay he provides excellent clarity into the atonement theology of Anselm and how it differs from that of Calvin.

²² Philip L. Quinn, "Abelard on Atonement: "Nothing Unintelligible, Arbitrary, Illogical, or Immoral about It," in *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, edited by Eleonore Stump (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 282. Quinn taught at Brown University

Christians from different traditions, such as a Southern Baptist and an Episcopalian, would be more likely to agree on a doctrine, such as the Trinity, than they would on the doctrine of the atonement.

Despite the challenge of the long history of diversity in atonement doctrine, which, incidentally, also makes it such an exciting area to work in, it is my contention that it is possible to find a common basis for atonement theology. I have my own particular perspective on atonement theory as a former Southern Baptist who is now an Episcopalian, and I do this work using the resources found in my own location.²³ Yet my goal is not to speak exclusively to Episcopalians but to all Christians with the assumption that a common basis for atonement can be found using scripture and the ancient practices of the church of Baptism, Eucharist, confession and forgiveness.

From my studies for this thesis and in my classes in the Sewanee Advanced Degree Program, I have found that two concepts in particular, the Suffering Servant and messiahship, are at the heart of understanding Christ's atoning life, death, and resurrection. This thesis will not focus on the suffering servant and messiahship exclusively. These concepts, though, will form the basis of my argument against some atonement theories and in favor of narrative Christus Victor.

I have also found that, while I will be examining atonement theology in terms of three "families," every atonement theory is to some extent a blend of these families. Even Abelard, to whom the moral influence family and even exemplarism is attributed, is, in

before becoming the John A. O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. In this essay, he clarifies Abelard's theology and shows that it is not as exemplarist as Weaver and others sometimes make it out to be.

²³ Other relevant aspects of that location include that I am a middle class, white, male Episcopal parish priest living in a small middle Georgia town.

fact, best described as a hierarchical pluralist. Like many theologians, his atonement theory has a dominant motif to which others are subordinated.²⁴ The atonement theory I argue for in this thesis, a version of narrative Christus Victor, is also a hierarchy that finds some elements of moral influence theory to have validity based upon scripture and sacramental practice.

As discussed above, in Mark 10:35-45 Jesus clearly teaches his disciples about the atoning nature of his life, death, and resurrection. Since in this passage he references the suffering servant of Isaiah 52:13-53:12, it is important to do a thorough study of the suffering servant of Isaiah. In studying the suffering servant we will gain insight into how Jesus and/or the early believers of Mark's community understood Jesus' atonement. Mark 10:35-45 not only pairs Jesus with the suffering servant of Isaiah, but it does so in order to describe Jesus as Messiah. Since the atonement of Christ is rooted in allegiance to Jesus as King and citizenship in his Kingdom, it will be important to also study how Jesus and the Christian communities that produced the New Testament understood the concept of messiahship.

In the next chapter, as I discuss Suffering Servant and messiahship, I will focus on areas that shed light on Christ's atonement. In chapter two, I will show how these two traditions were used by the New Testament writers to understand Christ's atonement and describe it to others. In chapter three, I will use these studies to form the basis of criteria for any valid atonement theory and ultimately to argue in favor of narrative Christus Victor.

²⁴ Quinn, "Abelard on Atonement," 291-292.

In chapter four, I will explore the influence of penal substitution theory and prison system philosophy on one another as they have developed to the present day. In this chapter I will also critique penal substitution theory and the way that it supports and enables the use of capital punishment.

In the concluding chapter I will argue that the Church is fundamentally the reconciled community formed by Christ's nonviolent atonement. Based on the church's sacramental practices which embody narrative Christus Victor, I will then argue in favor of a vision for a Christian response to the death penalty. This response will emphasize living into the reconciled community over inflicting retribution and viewing wrongdoing as the wounding of relationships, which requires healing, over breaking the law, which requires satisfaction. All of this will lead to a vision of the Church on death row that is the reconciling Body of Christ, stretching out its "arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within [its] saving embrace."²⁵

²⁵ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 101.

Chapter 1

A Different Kind of King: Jesus as the Servant Messiah

In the Introduction I pointed out that in Mark 10:35-45 Jesus describes his vocation by pairing two seemingly irreconcilable concepts, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and the messiahship tradition that had been developing within ancient Judaism for hundreds of years. As this passage in Mark's gospel demonstrates, the community of Jesus' followers did not develop their theological concepts and systems out of nowhere. To understand and explain their experience they used the metaphors and traditions of their Jewish faith and scripture. In particular, Jesus' followers, and perhaps Jesus himself, drew on the figures of Isaiah's Suffering Servant and the messiah portrayed in such passages as Daniel 7. More than any others, it was these two concepts that were combined with the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection to form the early Church's message of Christ's atonement.

In this chapter I will examine both the Suffering Servant Poem and the messiahship tradition.¹ These two concepts will form the basis for the next chapter's discussion of the development of the early Church's witness as expressed in the New Testament as well as narrative Christus Victor atonement theory, which this thesis defends. Further, the study of the Suffering Servant and Messiahship traditions in this chapter and the next chapter's study of what the New Testament writers chose to draw from them and what they explicitly chose to reject from them will help form a basis of assessment of the various atonement theologies discussed in chapter three.

¹ This chapter draws heavily on the notes, research, and material from several of my classes in the Sewanee Advanced Degree Program: "Old Testament Prophets," "Judaism at the Time of Jesus," and "Isaiah and Its Empires."

By pairing different characteristics of the Suffering Servant with the messiah figure, this chapter will show that there are significant points of intersection between them as well as significant differences. Both the Suffering Servant Poem and the messiahship tradition, for example, depict a single heroic figure, anointed by God, who brings redemption to the community of his followers and finally to the world as a whole. Yet one of these narratives envisions this transformation being accomplished through violence while the other envisions the method as non-violence. The early Christians will affirm the individual, community, and world changing nature of both of these traditions. They will see in Jesus both the king of the messiahship tradition to whom all allegiance is due, and the servant-teacher of Second Isaiah who offers a new way of life to his disciples as they follow his example. Yet despite the early Christians' enthusiastic application of each of these traditions to Jesus, there is one striking difference in how they appropriate them: They will unequivocally reject the violence of the messiah figure and embrace the non-violence of the Servant. Their experience of Christ must not have left any doubt that there could be no compromise on that matter.

Two Figures: A Warrior King and a Servant Teacher

In Acts 8:34 it is no surprise that the Ethiopian Eunuch would have asked Philip the question, "Does the prophet refer to himself or to someone else?" The Servant in Second Isaiah is mysterious, and that has led to much speculation as to who he is. Yet, what is clear from Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is that he is a tragic figure. He is despised, powerless, and suffering from both disease and oppression. Therefore, although we are not given Philip's exact answer, as he spoke to the Eunuch about Jesus, he must have described the way that this poem reminded the early Christians of Jesus.

The identity of the Servant is also complicated because the poem is meant to function on at least two levels. The experience of the Servant so closely parallels that of the people of Israel that it must have been meant to offer a hopeful interpretation of their experience. Yet, the detailed description of the Servant suggests that he must have been an actual revered figure written about after his death by one of his followers. The tone of the passage suggests that it is a kind of eulogy written by one of the Servant's disciples for the community of his disciples.²

Joseph Blenkinsop and Christopher Seitz argue that the prophet who speaks about himself and his prophetic mission in 49:1-6 and 50:4-9 is the Servant who is eulogized by one of his disciples in 52:13-53:12. According to Seitz, "if the fourth of the servant passages is understood to be referring to him, it must have been composed by a disciple. On the whole, this still seems to be the most attractive solution to the problem of the Servant's identity."³

In addition to being understood as an individual redemptive figure and as the people of Israel as a whole, Blenkinsop points out that the Servant can also be viewed as the specific community that follows him and his teachings after his death. Blenkinsop states that a duality has been deliberately set up: The servant/s as the people of Israel and the servants as the prophetic minority owing allegiance to the martyred leader and his teachings: "These disciples take over from the community the responsibility and the

² Christopher R. Seitz, "Isaiah 40-66" in David L. Petersen, et. al, *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 423-24. Seitz is the senior research professor of biblical interpretation at Toronto School of Theology, Wycliffe College. I rely upon him in this chapter because he is a noted Old Testament scholar and theologian known for his work in biblical interpretation and theological hermeneutics.

³ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 356. An academic theologian and Old Testament scholar, Blenkinsopp is the John A. O'Brien Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies in the Department of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. His research focuses on the Old Testament Prophets and on the Pentateuch.

suffering inseparable from servanthood or instrumentality and, if this view of the matter is accepted, it is to one of these that we owe the tribute in 52:13-53:12.”⁴

This dual role of the Servant as both the leader and the community of his followers must have later influenced the early Christians’ understanding of Jesus. Just as the early Christians must have seen in the condition of the Servant a description of Jesus’ passion they must have also seen a parallel to the way that the Servant is both the individual and his community of disciples. In the same way that the community of the Servant’s disciples are also “The Servant” the community of Jesus’ followers will understand themselves to be the “Body of Christ” after his ascension.

The Servant is described in vivid terms. He is long suffering (53:7), which has led some to speculate that the poem alludes to Jeremiah, who is depicted as a long-suffering person who gives his life for others (Jeremiah 11:19). Others point to the fact that as an intercessory figure the Servant must be Moses, who in Deuteronomy 9:25-29 intercedes for the people.⁵ It is not hard to imagine, though, that the early Christians would see in the Servant a description of their Lord, who shared the Servant’s characteristics of intercession and long-suffering sacrificial love.

Regardless of whether one identifies the Servant as an individual, his community of followers, or the people of Israel as a whole, unlike the grandeur and power of semi-divine kingship of what would become the messianic tradition, Isaiah 52:13-53:12 depicts a figure who is pitiful in his suffering and oppression, whose entire life and vocation, not just his suffering, is reminiscent of that of Jesus. The body of the poem begins with a discussion of the Servant’s early years and his appearance (Isaiah 53:2-3). It continues

⁴ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 357.

⁵ Seitz, “Isaiah 40-66,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 425.

with a plant metaphor and a description of parched ground that explains the Servant's appearance and blighted career. The portrayal moves on to describe a person with no external appeal. He is said to be a person grossly disfigured by a disease, which must have brought with it a high degree of social isolation.⁶ It is not hard to see that in so many ways the suffering of the Servant must have reminded the early Christians of Jesus, who like the figure in Isaiah's poem was a servant teacher who courageously lived out his vocation in the face of opposition and suffering.

By contrast, the messianic tradition must have reminded the early Christians of Christ at his most exalted moments, such as his Baptism, the Transfiguration, and the Resurrection. Yet even despite the clear connections of Jesus' life with both the messianic tradition and the Suffering Servant poem, when one compares the tragic figure described in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 with the powerful figure of the messiah tradition, it is almost hard to imagine how anyone got the idea to put the two of them together! In most ways, the two figures could not be more different.

In their book, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature*, Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins show that the figure depicted in the messiahship tradition is a semi-divine, powerful, warrior-king. This tradition has its roots in the monarchy of ancient Israel. Messianic hope began to reemerge and evolve during Hellenistic period and continued to develop and was appropriated into the Christology of the New Testament writers. Its evolution can also be seen in the other apocalyptic literature in the 1st century A.D.

In order to understand the messiahship tradition and what it meant to the writers of the New Testament it is important to examine its origins in the Israelite monarchy

⁶ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 353.

because many of these characteristics will carry over into the messianic tradition when it reemerges during the Hellenistic period. One such characteristic is that the Israelite king was understood to be divine, not in the sense of a god who is worshiped, but as God's agent on earth who has a special relationship with God.⁷

The degree and nature of the divinity of the kings of ancient Israel can be seen in the royal psalms. Psalm 2, which states, "You are my son, this day have I begotten you," is in the context of an enthronement ceremony in which the king is declared to be God's son, thereby giving him legitimacy.⁸ The king is explicitly called "son of God" not only in Psalm 2 but also in Psalm 89 and in the promise to David in 2 Samuel 7.⁹ Like these passages, Psalm 110, which refers to God's begetting of the king, reflects a "Jerusalemite enthronement ceremony."¹⁰ Psalms 110 and 45 also appear to attribute divinity to the king, though the interpretation of these passages is under debate.¹¹ To see how this theology became part of the messiahship tradition that was incorporated by the New Testament, one need only look at Jesus' Baptism in Mark Chapter 1. In this passage, a voice from heaven states at Jesus' Baptism, "You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased,"¹² a direct connection with the royal psalms, especially Psalm 2.

⁷ Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 204. John J. Collins is Holmes Professor of Old Testament Criticism and Interpretation at Yale Divinity School. Adela Yarbro Collins is Buckingham Professor of New Testament Criticism and Interpretation at Yale Divinity School. They are both the authors of numerous books.

⁸ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 12.

⁹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 2.

¹⁰ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 19.

¹¹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 2.

¹² Mark 1:11

According to Collins and Collins, “in the Hebrew Bible to say that the king was the son of God meant that he had a special relationship but certainly not parity.”¹³ The main implication of being God’s son was that he acted as God’s surrogate on earth and could expect God’s help, especially in war.¹⁴ However, the Israelite kings were not as exalted as the Pharaohs. For example, the divine begetting was not thought of in sexual terms as in some Egyptian instances, but was a result of the king’s ascension to the throne.¹⁵ The Hebrew texts also do not emphasize the superhuman wisdom of the king as the Egyptian ones do, but rather emphasize the love of justice and righteousness associated with kingship in the Canaanite tradition.¹⁶

Collins and Collins state that it is an intriguing question as to whether the king in ancient Israel was thought to be immortal. They state that Psalms 72 and 21 might be suggesting this idea.¹⁷ Here again, kingship is not as exalted as the Egyptian model, but it still goes beyond the normal human condition. The Israelite king was not viewed as a god, and he was not an object of cult or veneration, but his divinity also meant that he was set apart from other humans.¹⁸ He was viewed as divine in the sense of having a special mediating role, speaking, acting, and leading on God’s behalf.

Yet despite its exalted nature, the kingship of ancient Israel was also characterized by its limitations. In Deuteronomy 17, for example, the king is made subject to the law,

¹³ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 22.

¹⁴ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 22.

¹⁵ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 20, 28.

¹⁶ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 23.

¹⁷ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 23.

¹⁸ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 23.

and 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 89 both provide punishment for errant monarchs, while still acknowledging the king as God's son. Further, exilic and early restoration texts (1 Kings 8 and Psalm 132) make conditional the promise that a Davidic king will always reign.¹⁹

In Nathan's oracle in 2 Samuel 7, which dates no earlier than Josiah and possibly after the exile,²⁰ we again have the language of divine sonship, but the sonship here is different than that of the royal psalms.²¹ Here, David is not declared to be the son of God. The language demythologizes the monarchy by deliberately drawing back from any suggestion of divine begetting. Collins and Collins point out that Nathan's oracle employs treaty language similar to the Mosaic Covenant to declare that the king of Israel is subject to God, who is the higher king, and that the king and his descendants will be held accountable for what they do.²²

The prophets solidify this vision of limited kingship and hold kings accountable to it. To summarize my point, the vision of monarchy in ancient Israel is one in which the king is exalted as God's anointed but at the same time is humble in the sense of being subject to the law just like everyone else. It is fascinating to see how the prophet class and institution works to build up this vision. For example, the prophets typically repudiate royal pretensions let alone royal claims to divinity, when kings take the understanding of their divinity too far.²³ Zechariah 9:9-10, for example, shows an incredible view of the king. He is humble and riding on a donkey. Despite the hope for

¹⁹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 47.

²⁰ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 26.

²¹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 28.

²² Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 33.

²³ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 45-46.

universal dominion, this prophecy clearly repudiates the militaristic ambitions of the kings of Israel and Judah.²⁴ This is an important point for this thesis because it underscores Israel's identity as a covenantal community to which even kings are accountable. Elements of this vision of a covenantal and relational community will be incorporated into the church's understanding of itself.

At the same time, however, the prophets articulate an ideal of kingship, which would be fundamental to later conceptions of the messiah, both in Judaism and Christianity.²⁵ Isaiah 8:23-9:6, for example, says that the predicted Immanuel's reign will entail endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. In this passage among the most remarkable of the titles given to the king is "mighty god", which suggests that Isaiah accepted the ideology of the Davidic house as the ideal, even if historical kings failed to live up to it.²⁶ Collins and Collins point out that this passage is inherently political, a theme that would be picked up by future messianic interpretation, especially within the New Testament.²⁷

At this point, it is interesting and important for this thesis to see how this royal theology and early messianic tradition interacted with the Suffering Servant in Second Isaiah. John Goldingay sees the Servant as Davidic while at the same time contrasting with King David: "The picture of the servant in 52:13-53:12 has Davidic resonances, including exalted majesty and a spectacular anointing, though in general it contrasts with the kingly ideal of someone handsome like David... YHWH's purpose is achieved

²⁴ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 46.

²⁵ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 42.

²⁶ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 42.

²⁷ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 43.

through someone who is nothing like David. Then YHWH promises that Israel as a whole is to have David's role in the world, in accordance with the Abrahamic promise (54:17b-55:5)."²⁸ If Goldingay is correct, it would seem that there was already the beginning of a tradition to combine the Servant and the messiahship tradition even hundreds of years before Jesus' birth. It should be noted, though, that this effort, however influential on the early Christian leaders, was nowhere as developed as it would become in the New Testament.

Aside from the messianic references to David, it is also illuminating to consider Second Isaiah's portrayal of Cyrus, who incredibly is described as God's "anointed" (45:1) and yet who in so many ways is a polar opposite figure to the Servant. According to Blenkinsop, the Servant in the last three Servant passages is presented in deliberate contrast to Cyrus, the "Servant of Yahweh" in 42:1-4.²⁹ Cyrus is exalted and praised for his great power to "tread down nations before him...opening doors before him" (45:1), a power he uses to deliver the Israelites.³⁰ Yet, the Servant is exalted and praised because

²⁸ John Goldingay, "The Theology of Isaiah" in *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches*, edited by David G. Firth and H. G. M. Williamson (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 173.

²⁹ Blenkinsop, *Isaiah 40-55*, 356.

³⁰ As an example of the continuing power of this "Cyrus interpretation" of the messiahship tradition, it is interesting to note that as this thesis is being written some evangelicals are using it to justify their support of Donald Trump for President of the United States (See, for example, "Leading Dominionist Says Donald Trump is a Modern-Day Lincoln Anointed By God," <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/leading-dominionist-says-donald-trump-modern-day-lincoln-anointed-god>). Like the way that the ancient Israelites regarded Cyrus, most evangelicals would not regard Trump as sharing their faith or community. Yet many would still see him as "God's anointed" in the sense that they believe that he is being used by God to fulfil God's purposes. From this perspective, it is also not too great a leap to justify Trump's signature issue, sending immigrants back to their home countries, based on the parallel of Cyrus sending the Israelites home. As will be shown, this kind of interpretation cannot be justified as Christian when one takes into account the New Testament's insistence on understanding Jesus of Nazareth through the lens of both the Suffering Servant and messiahship traditions.

of his willingness to deliver his people by facing humiliation, suffering, and death sacrificially.

The Hellenistic period will be a crucial time in the evolution of the messiahship tradition. Messianic eschatological expectation disappears after the Babylonian exile, but it begins to resurge during this period.³¹ It is especially seen in the books of Daniel and Enoch,³² but we begin to see it in the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Although it is limited, there is also evidence for messianic hope in the Septuagint. Collins points to the willingness of the Septuagint translators to use divine or transcendent language when referring to the king.³³ For example, the translators reproduce statements about the king being the son of God in Psalm 89, begotten by God in Psalm 110, and addressed as God in Psalm 45.³⁴ The idea that the king is preexistent is introduced into Psalm 110 and possibly implied in Psalm 72. In the prophetic books, a number of passages are construed in an apparently messianic sense even though there is no such sense in the Hebrew.³⁵ For example, in Isaiah 7:14, the word the Greek translation chooses for ‘young girl’ does not necessarily mean ‘virgin’, but it does more often correspond to virgin, and it is an odd choice. The writer of Matthew’s Gospel will use this translation to support his virgin birth narrative.³⁶ Although the translators did not introduce the idea of divinity into these

³¹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 45.

³² Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 46.

³³ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 62.

³⁴ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 55, 62.

³⁵ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 59.

³⁶ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 59.

texts from the psalms and the prophets, they may have understood them to refer to a future messiah.³⁷

The development of the messiahship tradition during the Hellenistic period was not only the result of the resurgence in the eschatological hope of the divine Israelite king. The messiahship tradition was also influenced to a lesser but probably still consequential degree by Hellenistic ruler cults.³⁸ The ruler cults were common during the Hellenistic period, and, therefore, it would seem to be a strong possibility that they would influence Jewish views of a future messiah. After Alexander the Great conquered Egypt, for example, he consulted an oracle of Ammon, who acknowledged Alexander as Pharaoh and told him that he was the son of Ammon-Re, whom the Greeks identified as Zeus.³⁹ Alexander became the object of a cult after his death. The Ptolemy Dynasty synthesized Greco-Hellenistic and Pharaonic traditions of honoring the ruler as a god.⁴⁰ The Seleucid Dynasty also hailed its kings as divine. In both of these dynasties there were myths about divine birth.⁴¹

The messianic figure that develops during the Hellenistic period is variously depicted as Archangel Michael, Melchizedek, and the “Son of Man” in Daniel 7. Although the stories and characteristics of these figures in these stories vary, in every case, the portrayal is of a fierce figure who saves Israel by driving out the Gentiles. Unlike the tragic Servant of Isaiah 52:13-53:12, this messianic figure is characterized by

³⁷ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 55.

³⁸ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 48.

³⁹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 48.

⁴⁰ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 50-51.

⁴¹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 53.

power, glory, and honor. He is depicted as angelic and superhuman. Like the kings of Israel, he is subordinate to God but he is divine, often portrayed sitting on a throne. Always, he is a violent avenger. A consistent picture emerges of a righteous figure that is to save Israel by driving out the occupiers, evil-doers, and those who are corrupt.⁴²

This apocalyptic literature and the tradition it came out of will have a great impact on New Testament Christology. Evidence of this influence, for example, can be seen in comparing the “Son of God” text from Qumran to the Gospel of Luke 1:32-35. The “Son of God” text refers to a figure who is called Son of God and Son of the Most High using Aramaic phrases that correspond exactly to the Greek titles given to Jesus in the Luke passage. In both cases these phrases probably allude to the “one like a son of man” figure in Daniel 7.⁴³

More evidence of the connection between New Testament Christology and the messiahship tradition is found in non-biblical apocalyptic literature that is written at about the same time as the New Testament writings. In the Similitudes, which are a section of parables from *I Enoch*,⁴⁴ for example, the messiah has a human appearance, though he is not human in a normal sense but “like one of the holy angels”, and appears with the Head of Days. He has a higher rank than the other angels, and he existed before the world was created. Here the “Son or Man” is developed beyond anything found in Daniel by applying to him language used to describe wisdom. Much like Jesus in the

⁴² Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 64.

⁴³ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 72-73.

⁴⁴ Although there are clear indications that this is a Jewish document written at about the same time as the New Testament, its origins are ambiguous.

Gospel of John, the messiah here is portrayed as a “the light of the nations.”⁴⁵ Other aspects of this figure include that he is not a human descendant of David, but he is the Anointed, or Messiah of the Lord, who takes over the functions of the Davidic king vis-à-vis the nations. He is installed on a glorious throne and takes over the function of eschatological judge, which has resonances of Jesus portrayed as a judge on his throne in Matthew 25. The motif of enthronement is reminiscent of Psalm 110.⁴⁶ He is the heavenly representative and vindicator of the righteous on earth.⁴⁷ Unlike Jesus, he never has an earthly career.⁴⁸ He is a heavenly king and judge, and his power in heaven compensates for the lack of power of the righteous on earth. All of this shows a significant development in messianism that will have considerable impact on early Christology.

Violence vs. Nonviolence and the Theology of Redemptive Sacrificial Love

It is important to compare the Suffering Servant Poem’s approach to violence and suffering to that of the messiahship tradition. As will be shown in the upcoming chapters, on this matter the New Testament writers will support the theology of the Suffering Servant Poem over that of the messiahship tradition. As has been thoroughly discussed in this chapter, the messiahship tradition in the form it was received by the early Church consistently envisions justice, righteousness, vindication, and redemption being brought through the political and military power of a king-like figure with the vengeance and

⁴⁵ Citations from the Similitudes follow George W.E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, *I Enoch: A New Translation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 50-95.

⁴⁶ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 90.

⁴⁷ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 94.

⁴⁸ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 93.

violence of a warrior. The Suffering Servant Poem offers a counter narrative, one which will be picked up by the early Church, that responds to violence and suffering, even that of oppression, with nonviolence.

In addition to the differences of the two traditions on the matter of how to respond to violence, in direct contrast to the messiahship narratives, the Suffering Servant Poem argues that there is redeeming quality to sacrificial love lived out even in the face of suffering and violent oppression. In the following chapters I will show that the atonement theology of the New Testament picks up and develops this idea of redemptive sacrificial love. Suffice it to say here, though, that although Mark 10:35-45 shows that Jesus and/or the Markan Church will use the Suffering Servant poem in their development of a theology of Christ's atonement, a detailed theory of atonement is not present in the Suffering Servant Poem itself. This is true despite the connection of the Servant with the *'asam*, or guilt offering, in Isaiah 53:10, to which we will return in a moment.

Before discussing the significance of the term, *'asam*, we should return to the story of the Suffering Servant itself as Second Isaiah vividly tells it in his Poem. As I pointed out earlier, the Servant is very Job-like in his many afflictions. Until Isaiah 53:6, the Servant's suffering is primarily that of a painful disease. In verse 7, though, there is a shift to suffering from physical violence. This violence results in him being "cut off from the land of the living" (53:8b), meaning that the Servant dies. Although the wording of Isaiah 53:8a is obscure, some commentators interpret this verse, and specifically the word, *'luqqah'*, to mean that the Servant is literally confined following a judicial process that leads to the verdict of a prison sentence or execution. Other scholars, such as Blenkinsop, believe that the poet is speaking in a more general sense of oppression and

injustice.⁴⁹ Although it is the most textually obscure part of the passage, from the context we can see that Isaiah 53:8b must mean that the Servant's death was in some way connected with the people's transgression. Finally, verse 9 speaks of the ultimate insult, the unjust denial of an honorable burial, indicating that the Servant's ill repute continued after his death.⁵⁰

The Servant's humiliation, suffering, and sacrificial death profoundly impacts, first the disciple who writes his eulogy, then the community of the Servant's followers, then Israel, and finally, if only as the eschatological hope of the Jews, the nations and the empires over Israel.

Perhaps the most striking statement of this passage is in Isaiah 53:8b: "For the transgression of my people was he punished." Blenkinsop points out that this statement would have gone against the "dominant theory of moral causality."⁵¹ According to this point of view, the "wages of sin" are brought on the individual or community who commits the sin. The Eulogist must have originally accepted this dominant theory of moral causality, and applied it to his interpretation of the suffering and death of the Servant, but something in the Servant's teaching and actions caused the Eulogist to change his mind: "Whatever the sad condition of the servant, to which we shall return, the speaker and no doubt many in the community at first accepted the *interpretatio communis*, amply illustrated in the Psalms and Job, that his condition was the result of divine punishment for sin: he was stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted (53:4b). But

⁴⁹ Blenkinsop, *Isaiah 40-55*, 353.

⁵⁰ Blenkinsop, *Isaiah 40-55*, 354.

⁵¹ Blenkinsop, *Isaiah 40-55*, 350.

then it dawned on him, as it did on the author of Job, that another explanation must be possible.”⁵² Goldingay agrees: “In 52:13-53:12 the prophet is on the way to death. The community assumes that this confirms its convictions about the prophet, but eventually realizes that this servant of YHWH suffers for the sake of ministering to them, turning the undeserved suffering that this ministry entails into an offering to YHWH that might compensate for the community’s own willfulness.”⁵³

The effect of this new perspective is to bring the Servant’s disciples to repentance and ultimately give them the vocation of nonviolent sacrificial love that they have been taught by the Servant and witnessed in his actions. In this way it can be said that the Servant gives his followers a new heart. In his essay in *Interpreting Isaiah*, “The Motif of Hardening in Isaiah,” Torsten Ublig describes what he sees as a unifying theme throughout Isaiah of a hardness of heart among the Israelites. In the Old Testament, hardening refers to the inability to change one’s mind, intentions, or perception. Sometimes people put themselves in a state of hardness of heart and sometimes YHWH does this to them as a consequence for their sin.⁵⁴ In Isaiah, the hardness of heart of the Israelites is both a sin that relates to unrighteous communication and also the consequence of that sin. This aspect of the Suffering Servant tradition will be important to the early Christians as they make sense of Christ’s life and death as sacrificial.

Ublig argues that it is the sacrificial suffering and death of the Servant that allows his followers and then the Israelites to break free of their hardness of heart and return to

⁵² Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 350-351.

⁵³ Goldingay, “The Theology of Isaiah,” *Interpreting Isaiah*, 170.

⁵⁴ Torsten Ublig, “Too Hard to Understand? The Motif of Hardening in Second Isaiah,” in *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches*, edited by David G. Firth and H. G. M. Williamson (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 63.

God: “Only when they join in the testimony about the Servant (Isa. 53:1-10) on their return (Isa. 52:11-12; cf. 55:2b-5) will they emerge as those whose hardness has been overcome and whose sins have been forgiven. Then they will fulfill their appointment as Yahweh’s witnesses before nations and kings (cf. Isa. 52:15-53:1).”⁵⁵

In Isaiah 53:10b we are told that the Servant has died, but he will have descendants. The achievement and work of the Servant now becomes that of his followers. (Isaiah 54:1-66:24). Here we have the shift from the dying generation to the ongoing new generation.⁵⁶ “While it is unlikely that the author thought of the survival of death or returning from the dead in a straightforward kind of way, it seems probable that he retained a strong sense of the Servant as an active presence among his followers.”⁵⁷ In the aftermath of the Servant’s death his disciples begin to live into the reality that his death “did not bring defeat but the possibility of a new beginning.”⁵⁸

After the Servant’s death, the Eulogist uses metaphors of ritual sacrifice, which are some of the most powerful images of his faith, to make sense of his experience theologically as a witness to the Servant’s life, teaching, suffering, death, and his ongoing ministry through the work of his disciples. The two metaphors he chooses for this task are the guilt offering (*‘asam*) and the scapegoat (*hatta’*t).

The most explicit descriptions of the Servant’s work are found in Isaiah 53:10a, which refers to him as an *‘asam*, or “guilt offering” and Isaiah 53:7b, which also alludes to the *‘asam* as it describes him as a lamb being led to the slaughter. According to ritual

⁵⁵ Ublig, “Too Hard to Understand? The Motif of Hardening in Second Isaiah,” 77.

⁵⁶ Seitz, “Isaiah 40-66,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 460.

⁵⁷ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 355.

⁵⁸ Seitz, “Isaiah 40-66,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 424.

prescription, the *'asam* was an animal, either a ram without blemish, a lamb, or a goat offered for sacrifice as a means for expiating certain kinds of voluntary or involuntary sins (Lev 5:1-26[5:1-6:7]; 7:2; 14:24). “This type of sacrifice was the indispensable means for the removal of guilt and liability for punishment in especially serious cases of encroachment on holy objects and places. It also served to make reparation for a range of transgressions (probably not listed exhaustively in the relevant ritual text, Lev 5:14-26[5:14-6:7]), such as theft, fraud, and the swearing of false oaths.”⁵⁹ The idea behind this type of reparation sacrifice was that “given the right dispositions, the transgressions and the guilt of the sacrificial adepts die with the death of the *'asam* animal.”⁶⁰

Blenkinsop points out that the statement that the Servant bore the community's sin also echo's the scapegoat ritual of Leviticus 16. In this ritual one of two animals is sacrificed as an atoning sin-offering (*hatta't*), and the other carries all the community's iniquities into a solitary, literally, “cut-off-land,” recalling the Servant being cut off from the land of the living (Isaiah 53:8b).

There can be no debate that the use of these metaphors throughout the poem reflects a concern with the problem of how to deal with the problem of guilt and shame that is present in the particular situation in which the Eulogist finds himself. We are not told what sin the guilt and shame resulted from, but given that the Eulogist at first accepted the dominant view that the Servant suffered and died because of his own sin, the Servant's followers must feel at least partly responsible for his death or at least the guilt of supporting the killing of their beloved mentor.

⁵⁹ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 354.

⁶⁰ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 354.

The reader of the poem is left to ask in what way is the Servant an *'asam* and a *hatta't*? One possible interpretation is that the Servant is exactly like the animal in these rituals. The guilt and shame is understood to be literally “put on” the Servant. They are then taken away from the community when he is killed. Obviously, this interpretation would provide support for later Christian atonement theories. For example, in Chapter 4 I will discuss how Calvin uses this interpretation to support his penal substitution theory. Yet this interpretation is implausible. For one thing, the idea that God would require the sacrifice of one of his innocent children is repugnant to the witness of the rest of scripture. In fact, it is the absence of anything in the Old Testament that even approaches suggesting approval of human sacrifice that makes the call to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22 stand out so dramatically.⁶¹ However one interprets God’s intent in that passage, the fact that in the end the Angel stops Abraham and replaces Isaac with an animal makes clear that human sacrifice is not God’s will. Indeed, in Leviticus, the whole sacrificial system for expiating sin is outlined in detail, even describing the kind and condition of the animal, so that there can be no ambiguity about what qualifies as an acceptable sacrifice. Human life is sacred, and, although dealing with sin, guilt and shame requires a serious response, sacrifice is limited only to animals. As Blenkinsop points out, although the *'asam* and the *hatta't* are clear analogies with the Servant, like all analogies each of

⁶¹ Admittedly, there is controversy among scholars on this point. Many argue that there is evidence of child sacrifice in early Israelite religion, echoes of which can be heard in the command of Exodus 22:29 to ‘offer’ or ‘dedicate’ each first born son to God. At the very least, though, if child sacrifice was the original view of Israelite religion, the Aquedah was a turning point in which it was decisively rejected. See Jonathan Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*, (New Haven: Yale University Press 1993) 12-14.

these is not a perfect parallel. Because “the Servant is not an animal his death cannot simply be on par with the death of a lamb or a goat.”⁶²

Dispensing with the literal interpretation of the *‘asam* and the *hatta’*t leaves one other possible interpretation: The Eulogist, faced with a disconnect between his theology and the reality he witnessed and experienced, must have turned to the theological framework of the *‘asam* and the *hatta’*t a way of expressing in poetic metaphor the mystery of the significance of the Servant’s suffering. There simply was no other way to adequately describe this mystery. According to this interpretation, the Servant takes away others’ sin because those who witness his sacrificial act are given a new theological perspective, which leads to repentance and ultimately a new heart and a new way of life as they adopt the Servant’s vocation.

The Servant is *like* an *‘asam* and a scapegoat because his act does ultimately lead to freedom from sin, guilt, and shame, for the Eulogist, then the community of the Servant’s disciples, then the Nation of Israel, and finally the entire human family. The language in the poem of it being God’s will to crush the Servant and God laying on him “the iniquity of us all”, is again metaphorical language of ritual sacrifice to describe the way that even out of such tremendous tragedy and injustice has come such great redemption.

At this point, it is worth noting the differences here between the Suffering Servant Poem’s approach to sin and that of the messiahship tradition. First, the poem primarily, though not entirely, deals with the problem of an individual’s (in this case, the Eulogist’s) guilt and shame that results from his sin against another (in this case, the Servant). The messiahship tradition on the other hand, deals with the problem of how one responds to

⁶² Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 355.

sin committed against oneself. Second, while a “substitutionary atonement” kind of interpretation of the terms ‘*asam* and *hatta*’*t* as this poem applies them would not be nonviolent in that it would justify the killing of the Servant, the metaphorical interpretation of these terms that I have proposed is necessarily nonviolent. Read from the metaphorical perspective, we see that the Eulogist’s goal is not to justify the violence against his friend, as if he is happy that his friend suffered a horrible death. Rather, the Eulogist’s desire is to use the strongest terms he can, the metaphors of his faith, to honor and praise his servant-teacher’s faithful nonviolent witness, even in the face of great suffering, violence, and death.

On this point there could be no stronger contrast than the one between the servant and the messiah figure. The response of the messiahship tradition to the problem of oppression is for the messiah figure to intervene in the situation and save his powerless people with the power of violence. Suffering is never to be borne. It must be avenged. It is important to note that both the Suffering Servant Poem and the messiahship tradition affirm the need to engage powerfully with sinful oppression, injustice, and violence. The difference is in how the source of that power is envisioned, with a sword, or with nonviolent, sacrificial love.

In addition to telling a theological story about a particular person and his disciples, the poem must also express a redemptive interpretation of the Jewish experience of the Exile, the events leading to it, and the emergence from it. Isaiah 53:11 refers to going forth from the place of uncleanness, Babylon, and the passage just before the Suffering Servant Poem also talks about coming out of the Exile. Therefore, this

poem connects the work of the Servant in 52:13-53:12 with the Servant who is speaking in the previous passages. It also begins to bridge Second and Third Isaiah.⁶³

Blenkinsopp points out that this new theological perspective on both the suffering of the Servant and that of Israel makes suffering itself meaningful: “distress and suffering attain meaning as purposeful correction of a kind that brings reconciliation or wholeness and healing.”⁶⁴ This insight would have provided a new perspective on the history of the Israelite community from the time of going into Babylonian captivity until this moment of emerging from it.

The poem beautifully describes the experience of the Israelites, and it interprets the crushing defeat and exile that they have just been through in a way that helps them see God’s redeeming hand through it all. In 52:13 God announces the exaltation of the Servant that will follow his humiliation. Like the Servant in the passage, during the Babylonian exile the Jews must have felt themselves to have been as good as dead. Now, through this poem they are able to see meaning in what they have endured.

In Isaiah 52:15 we see that the Servant’s work has an impact on the other kings and nations surrounding Israel. The work of the Servant has shifted from the Servant to the community of his disciples and finally to Israel, all of which can see themselves in the Servant’s experience. “What is truly bold and without precedent, however, is the effort to think about that transition within a new set of parameters determined by God’s word to the servant involving the role of the nations.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 349.

⁶⁴ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 353.

⁶⁵ Seitz, “Isaiah 40-66,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 460.

This concern for other nations is a shift from the earlier understanding of Israel's vocation with regards to the nations. In Deuteronomy, for example, Israel's concern with regards to the nations is only what they would say if Israel dies in the wilderness. They would say that God was not able to bring them to the land, and because he hated them he let them die (Deut. 9:28).⁶⁶ In the Suffering Servant poem, however, because Israel is the Servant we have a different concept than what is portrayed in Deuteronomy. Now the Servant's death and suffering happens at the hands of the nations and Israel bears a punishment at their hands.⁶⁷ "But with the death of this individual servant, the servants depict the nations coming to an understanding of Israel's destiny, while Israel, in its own way, also understands that this individual expression of 'Israel,' in the servant (Isaiah 49:3), has affected the removal of sin, in the same way as Moses' death and intercession brought new life, for Israel."⁶⁸

The poem calls on Israel emerging from the Exile to embrace the Servant's vocation of sacrificial love and to let it be a witness to the rest of the nations. Other Nations may still be viewed as "enemies," in the sense that they represent the potential to harm Israel and disrespect Israel's God. Yet the other Nations are also worthy of redemption. Indeed, the poem advocates for the eschatological expectation that the sacrificial work of the Servant Israel, even to the point of suffering if needed, will lead to harmony between all of the world's nations.

At this point, it is important to note that the ultimate vision of the messiahship tradition is similar – a world of justice without the threat of violence. There are notable

⁶⁶ Seitz, "Isaiah 40-66," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 461.

⁶⁷ Seitz, "Isaiah 40-66," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 462.

⁶⁸ Seitz, "Isaiah 40-66," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 462.

differences, though. The effect of the figure in the messiahship tradition on his followers is that they become part of a new society, the Kingdom of God. Their allegiances and commitments are reoriented toward those of the king. In the messiahship tradition other nations are intimidated. Their power is balanced by the incredible power of the Davidic king. Moreover, the powerlessness of God's people vis-a-vis the other nations is compensated for by the power of the messiah. This new reality ushers in a new age of justice for his followers through force.

The effect of the Suffering Servant on his followers is that he gives them a new heart. The effect of the Suffering Servant on the other nations is that they are convicted and repentant. This ushers in a new age for his followers. The Suffering Servant Poem emphasizes reconciliation and nonviolence. As the early Christians reflect on the teaching and leadership of Jesus they will synthesize these visions into one, choosing the nonviolence of the Servant over the violence of the messiahship tradition. This synthesized vision will be foundational for the Kingdom of God that Jesus and his followers will preach as well and the ecclesiology of the early Church.

The last point to make in this examination of the Suffering Servant and messiahship traditions is that there is a great difference between the way that each of them view exaltation. The New Testament writers and, in all likelihood, Jesus himself will be influenced by the how these two traditions view exaltation as they seek to answer the fundamental question, what is the kind of way of life and what kind of power does God call us to?

Unlike the messiahship tradition, which sees the exaltation of the king and later the messiah as an ontological characteristic given at birth or enthronement, the Suffering

Servant is exalted because of his sacrificial work on behalf of others. Collins and Collins show that in Daniel 7, the Melchizedek Scroll, and Similitudes of Enoch, and in 4 Ezra 13 there is even a growing tendency to view the messiah as a preexistent being of heavenly origin.⁶⁹ The exaltation of the Servant, though, is related to his intrinsic righteousness and faithfulness. His victory comes through his endurance.

According to Seitz, “To hear the servant’s vindication after the confession of the servants (53:10-12) means that misunderstanding and a cruel sentence of death are not the final word. As such, the confession of the servants moves the poem in a positive direction: the confession is met by promise.”⁷⁰ The Servant is exalted in the final verses of the poem because of his work of intercession for the transgressors (v. 12) and his suffering and death. God will vindicate the Servant (50:8) and God will vindicate those who follow the Servant’s guidance through his teaching.⁷¹ “YHWH’s own promise is that this suffering will not be the end. The self-offering will be effective. Horrific affliction will be succeeded by spectacular anointing. And the prophet will be the means whereby cleansing comes to nations and kings.”⁷²

The Servant here accomplishes his full mission: restoration of the survivors of Israel who then become the Servant who is the light to the nations. This is why he is exalted and why he affects righteousness and wisdom for generations to come. He helps the nations come to the knowledge of the light of Yahweh.⁷³ The next chapter will show

⁶⁹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 100.

⁷⁰ Seitz, “Isaiah 40-66,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 462.

⁷¹ Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 349.

⁷² Goldingay, “The Theology of Isaiah,” *Interpreting Isaiah*, 170.

⁷³ Seitz, “Isaiah 40-66,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 464.

that as the New Testament writers blend the messiahship and Suffering Servant traditions they will incorporate both of these aspects of exaltation into their portrayal of Jesus. On the one hand, they will view the church as participating in Jesus' exaltation as messiah in light of their citizenship in his Kingdom. On the other hand, they will participate in his exaltation as his vocation of nonviolent sacrificial love becomes their own.

In this chapter I have endeavored to show that in the messiahship and the Suffering Servant traditions we see two theological visions for God's people that at times seem to converge and at other times clearly disagree with each other. In the messiahship tradition we see the politics of being a part of a divine warrior-king's kingdom, resistance to those who oppose it, a concern for justice, and salvation from oppression through violence. In Isaiah's poem we see a call to faithfulness through following the self-sacrifice and nonviolence of the Servant Teacher. The next chapter's study of the New Testament will show that the first Christians enthusiastically incorporated the various aspects of both traditions, save one. They uncompromisingly chose the nonviolence of the Servant over the violence and vengeance of the warrior-king. Faced with the task of interpreting their experience with Jesus Christ the first Christians found in these two traditions the tools they needed to make sense of his life, death, and resurrection and proclaim them as God's atonement.

Chapter 2

Images, Metaphors, and Narrative of the New Testament that will form the Basis of the Church's Atonement Theology

J. Denny Weaver¹ and Adela and John Collins² show that the writers of the New Testament consistently use the Suffering Servant and the messianic traditions in order to explain the atoning work of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Collins and Collins show how the messianic tradition of the Hebrew Bible and related Jewish literature in the Hellenistic period impacts the early Christians' understanding of Jesus as the Messiah. Although this messianic tradition influences Paul, the writers of the Synoptic Gospels, and the writers of the Gospel of John and Revelation, it influences them in different ways. Weaver shows that although the writings of the New Testament are often used to support a version of satisfaction or moral influence theories, the New Testament, in fact, much more closely aligns with narrative Christus Victor.

The Three Families of Atonement Theology

In the next chapter, I will give a detailed critique of the three families of atonement theology that have developed throughout western church history: the Christus Victor theory, the satisfaction theory of Anselm, and the moral influence theory of Abelard.³ It is helpful here, though, to give a brief general outline of each of those

¹ J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011).

² Adela Yarbro Collins and John J Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008).

³ Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishing, 2003).

families so that I can begin to show how the New Testament writings offer support or undermine each of those theologies.

Christus Victor was the dominant image of the atonement in the early church. According to this view, humanity is held under the Devil's power due to the Fall. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus, as the Servant Messiah, defeats the Devil and his power of sin and death thus liberating Jesus' followers to become members of his kingdom and to pattern their lives on his life of nonviolent sacrificial service. In this chapter I will show that the New Testament draws on the Suffering Servant and messiahship traditions to portray Jesus as the Servant Messiah in ways that most closely align with narrative Christus Victor.

Although Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and the messiahship tradition contain no developed atonement theology per se, in this chapter I will show that both the Suffering Servant Poem and the messiahship tradition lend themselves to a type of "Christus Victor" reading. I say that hesitantly knowing that I risk shocking the reader. In no way am I implying that a particular Christian theology is present in Old Testament texts and traditions. My argument is simply that some of the same Christus Victor themes that I am explicating in this thesis are present in the images, metaphors, and narratives of the messiahship and Suffering Servant traditions.

The satisfaction theory of Anselm, published in *Cur Deus Homo?* in 1098, became the dominant theory of atonement throughout the west, and it has remained so into the present day, although it has developed into several distinctive forms, to be discussed further in the following chapter. According to this view, Christ was needed because only such a person, both divine and human, could make "satisfaction" for God's

wounded honor, a situation created by human sin. This satisfaction is made by Christ's perfect life offered at his death. The resurrection plays no role in this theory.

The moral influence theory, attributed to Abelard, began to be developed a generation after Anselm's satisfaction theory. Variations of it have been the main minority theory of the atonement to the present day. According to this view, the reason for Christ's incarnation and death on the cross is to display God's perfect love, which transforms the believer. Here again, there is normally no role for resurrection in this theory.

Jesus as the Servant Messiah in Paul's Writings

The common assumption that Paul's writings support one or another version of satisfaction atonement is incorrect. Weaver argues that in fact, Paul's writings "reveal that his thought corresponds to narrative Christus Victor."⁴ "The apocalyptic orientation of Paul is the framework within which to read and interpret what he says about the cross, death, and resurrection of Christ."⁵ While Paul uses language and images of sacrifice he greatly reinterprets these concepts in ways that they support narrative Christus Victor rather than Anselm.⁶

The understanding of messiahship as the semi-divine kingship described in Chapter One is central to the gospel Paul preaches. Collins and Collins point out that in almost all of Paul's letters he does not explain his use of the epithet "Christ", a term he uses quite often to refer to Jesus. Since his communities evidently already knew what he

⁴ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 52.

⁵ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 54.

⁶ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 54.

meant by the term, he must have explained it early in his relationship with the churches he founded. The teaching that Jesus is the Messiah and all of the implications of that teaching must have been fundamental to his proclamation to the gospel.⁷

Paul refers to Jesus as the Son of God, which for Paul is closely related to Jesus' being the Messiah. Collins and Collins argue that Paul's letters, such as 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians, show that it is likely that Paul's portrayal of Jesus as the Son of God is informed by the use of that epithet for the king of Israel in passages of the Hebrew Bible, such as Psalm 2, Psalm 89, Psalm 110, and 2 Samuel 7.⁸ Jesus' kingship is both political and cultic.⁹ Yet the Philippians hymn depicts Jesus as a different kind of king. Unlike other rulers, such as Nero, Jesus is much like the Suffering Servant in his humility, and therefore, like the Servant, he is exalted as universal king.¹⁰

There is more information in Romans about Paul's understanding of the term, "Son of God," than there is in his other letters. This is probably because he did not found the church in Rome and had not visited it and therefore had to introduce his theology in his letter.¹¹ Like his other letters, here the evidence points to the meaning of the term, with "Son of God" being the biblical epithet of the king transferred to Jesus as the messiah. However, Jesus' status as the Son of God is also linked with his death on behalf of others, reflecting reinterpretation of the messianic tradition in light of the crucifixion of Jesus. In this reinterpretation, the Suffering Servant poem surely must have been an

⁷ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 102, 106, 108, 113, 122.

⁸ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 102, 107, 112, 116.

⁹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 117.

¹⁰ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 116.

¹¹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 116.

important resource. In Romans 8, we also see Paul's incorporation of the messianic tradition when he connects being the "Son of God" with being like God in having a glorious appearance and eternal life.

While Paul has a highly exalted view of Jesus in Romans, he does not necessarily imply preexistence in this letter.¹² In other letters, though, Collins and Collins do see preexistence in Paul's understanding of the Messiah.¹³ Possibly in 1 Corinthians and clearly in 2 Corinthians, for example, Paul uses language much like that in the Wisdom of Solomon to identify Christ with God's wisdom, which existed before the birth of Jesus.¹⁴ Jesus is also clearly preexistent in the Philippians hymn.¹⁵

For Paul, Christ uses his power as the Messiah not to destroy his enemies and those of his people as Archangel Michael and Melchizedek do, but to liberate from the law. Given Paul's clear understanding of Jesus as the Messiah, the death of Christ, for Paul, meant freedom from the law because the law called anyone cursed who was hanged on a tree (Galatians 3:13).¹⁶ Therefore, a crucified Messiah and the law were mutually exclusive. "The death of Christ signifies the great reversal, because the judgement of the Torah on Christ becomes instead the judgement of God in Christ on the Torah."¹⁷ Rather than the law being ended, Christ's death signifies the fulfilment of the law. As the Servant Messiah, Christ died a sacrificial death for the forgiveness of sins condemned by

¹² Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 121.

¹³ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 147.

¹⁴ Collins and Collins, *The King and Messiah as Son of God*, 112.

¹⁵ Collins and Collins, *The King and Messiah as Son of God*, 116.

¹⁶ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 54.

¹⁷ J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1980), 183-86.

the law (Acts 13:38-39). It was a death “for us” and “for our sins” (Galatians 3:13; 1 Corinthians 15:3).

In Isaiah, the Servant’s death and exaltation inaugurates a new age for the transformed community of his disciples and ultimately for the people of Israel and the world as a whole. Similarly, for Paul, Christ’s sacrificial death marks the inauguration of a new age. Christ’s death and resurrection marks the defeat of the powers of evil, sin, and death. For Paul, the sacrificial death of the Servant Messiah is God’s judgement on the powers.¹⁸

Christ’s death and resurrection for Paul also function in much the same way that figures in the messiahship tradition such as Archangel Michael and Melchizedek inaugurate a new age for God’s people. “Resurrection constitutes the basis of the new creation, transformed life lived under the reign of God.”¹⁹ Living into the reign of God means participation in Christ’s death and resurrection as one dies to the values of “the world” and instead commits to the values of Christ’s kingdom.²⁰

Paul adapts Jewish apocalyptic thought in much the same way that he adapts the messiahship tradition. In Jewish apocalyptic thought, faithfulness and obedience are rewarded with resurrection. For Paul, Christ’s resurrection is the “first fruits” of the resurrection given to his followers. While the resurrection signifies God’s judgment on humankind, it also signifies God’s grace in the new life that has been given to all.²¹

¹⁸ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 55.

¹⁹ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 56.

²⁰ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 66.

²¹ Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 56.

Paul's apocalyptic view of Jesus as the Servant Messiah aligns with narrative Christus Victor. As Weaver points out, "Anselm's satisfaction atonement has no necessary role for the resurrection."²² Yet for Paul, "the death of Jesus has no salvific impact in and of itself, and as an isolated entity it has no 'effect' on God or on sinful humans."²³ Rather, Jesus' death is salvific only because it is the result of his vocation as the Servant Messiah who inaugurates a new kingdom and because God responds to his sacrificial death by raising him so that the promise of his kingdom might be fulfilled for all. Anselm's satisfaction atonement has no use for the messiahship or suffering servant traditions as they have been described in this thesis because satisfaction theory is not based on the triumph of a new kingdom characterized by nonviolent sacrificial love. For Paul, this triumph, which is signified by the resurrection, is foundational, but in satisfaction atonement, the focus is on the penalty-paying death. Because satisfaction atonement does not take into account the power, agency, and triumph of Christ in the messianic tradition, nor does it recognize the importance of the nonviolent character of the Suffering Servant tradition, it is incompatible with the logic of Paul's thought.

For all of these reasons, narrative Christus Victor is the atonement theory that is compatible with Paul. It is "the apocalyptic orientation of narrative Christus Victor, with the proleptic presence of the reign of God (or the future reign of God breaking into the present) that makes narrative Christus Victor the motif that supports confrontation of the status quo by the church as representative of the reign of God...In contrast, lacking a proleptic presence of the reign of God via the resurrection, satisfaction atonement features an image of salvation outside of history, which means that it lacks any impulse

²² Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 56.

²³ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 61.

of confrontation with and witness to the social order, which orients it toward accommodation and support of the status quo.”²⁴

Weaver concludes his analysis of Paul’s writings by pointing out that Romans 3:21-26, which is often cited as proof positive that Paul is congruent with satisfaction atonement, is in fact more likely congruent with narrative Christus Victor. In this passage, Paul states: “they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a [*hilasterion*] by his blood, effective through faith.” The term *hilasterion* poses translation difficulties. If it is translated “propitiation,” the text makes Jesus’ death an offering to God that appeases God or turns away God’s wrath, which would align with satisfaction atonement. If it is translated as “expiation” or “sacrifice of atonement” as it is in the NRSV, the emphasis shifts to the effect of the sacrifice of cleansing the sinner. The final option is to translate *hilasterion* as “mercy seat,” the location in the most holy place in the Tabernacle and later the Temple where the Lord would meet the priestly representatives of the people. If this is what Paul means, he is saying that the crucified Christ is the mercy seat, the place at which atonement is made. Jesus’ “death and shed blood is not aimed to appease God, nor does it form a cleansing action on human sin. It rather marks that in Christ God’s rule and forgiveness are made visible in the world.”²⁵ The mercy seat translation is congruent with the rest of Paul’s writings, which emphasize the power and agency of the messiah tradition and the sacrificial character of the Suffering Servant. Therefore, this translation is most likely what Paul has in mind.

²⁴ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 57.

²⁵ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 68.

Jesus as the Servant Messiah in the Synoptic Gospels

Unlike Paul's letters, there is little evidence that the Synoptic Gospels portray Jesus as preexistent.²⁶ Yet like Paul, the Synoptic Gospels emphasize Jesus' kingship with the royal epithet, "Son of God," and his exaltation to his messianic office at the time of his resurrection.²⁷

All of the Synoptic gospels refer to Jesus as the Son of God.²⁸ As in Paul's letters, in the Synoptic Gospels this title is connected with the royal Psalms. At Jesus' Baptism, for example, God's statement refers to Psalm 2. Mark's connection of Jesus' Baptism with this Psalm implies that Mark views Jesus' Baptism as a coronation in which Jesus is anointed messiah.²⁹ The genealogies in Matthew and Luke,³⁰ the Transfiguration,³¹ the acclamation of Peter,³² and the passion narratives³³ also all explain the royal epithet of, "Son of God," depicting Jesus as the long awaited Davidic messiah.

Much like Paul's letters, Jesus is a new kind of king in the Synoptic Gospels, one who sounds very much like the Servant of Second Isaiah. Jesus is a prophet,³⁴ and he dies

²⁶ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 147.

²⁷ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 148.

²⁸ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 127,134.

²⁹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 127.

³⁰ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 148.

³¹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 131.

³² Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 142.

³³ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 133-135.

³⁴ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 129, 140.

on behalf of his followers.³⁵ This is a new Christian element to the messianic tradition. For example, although the first two chapters of Luke set up the expectation of a Davidic messiah, Jesus' inaugural speech in which he refers to Isaiah 61:1-2 begins to reinterpret this expectation and portray Jesus as a prophetic messiah in line with Isaiah's Servant rather than a warrior messianic tradition.³⁶ Although Isaiah 61:1-2, on which Jesus' speech is based, is not an exact connection with the Suffering Servant poem of Isaiah 53, both of these passages have similar themes. "When Jesus proclaimed that this Scripture was fulfilled (4:21), he represented and made present a movement in history, namely, the reign of God, that challenges the forces which threaten and enslave, whether they are economic or political. He confronted the social order with a new reality."³⁷

In their birth narratives, Matthew and Luke add a new twist to the understanding of Jesus as the Son of God that is not found in Mark or in Paul's letters.³⁸ Matthew changes the "young woman" from the Isaiah passage to "virgin" probably because he is aware of the Greek and Roman stories of great men being fathered by deities with human women.³⁹ Interpreting the prophecy from Isaiah in this way enables followers of Jesus to claim that his origins are equally and probably more miraculous than the birth stories of powerful Greek and Roman figures since Jesus' father is not a god but the God.⁴⁰ Luke adds that Jesus is the Son of the Most High, a term found in the Hebrew Bible, which

³⁵ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 140.

³⁶ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 146.

³⁷ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 36.

³⁸ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 145.

³⁹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 137-138.

⁴⁰ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 138.

would have been a declaration of his Jewish messiahship, but which also would have reminded his audience of Zeus and the stories of Zeus fathering sons by human women.⁴¹ Matthew and Luke's understanding of Jesus' sonship implies that he is divine in a new way while maintaining the view that he is the Jewish messiah of Israel in the sense that he is God's royal and divine agent and still subordinate to God.⁴²

Exaltation is clearly an irreconcilable difference between the suffering servant and messianic traditions. In the messianic tradition, the messiah is semi-divine and if he is not pre-existent, his exaltation is an ontological characteristic of birth or enthronement. For the Servant, exaltation occurs as a result of self-sacrifice on behalf of others. Unlike many of Paul's writings, which take a pre-existent view of Jesus' messiahship, the synoptics choose the suffering servant model of Jesus' exaltation. Collins and Collins believe that though Jesus is a holy prophet and divine, he is neither preexistent nor equal with God in the Synoptic Gospels and exercises his role as the heavenly messiah only after his resurrection.⁴³ They point out that although some scholars have claimed that Jesus' statement, "I have come," implies preexistence, this was simply an idiomatic way of speaking that meant that certain people were sent by God for a certain divine purpose.⁴⁴ Moreover, the portrayal of Jesus as divine in the Transfiguration might be viewed not as an indication of preexistence but as a preview of the resurrection.⁴⁵ Although Jesus appears to be wisdom embodied in Matthew, this does not necessarily

⁴¹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 145.

⁴² Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 138.

⁴³ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 141.

⁴⁴ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 124.

⁴⁵ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 132.

imply preexistence because The Wisdom of Solomon states that wisdom passes into holy souls in every generation.⁴⁶

The term, “Son of Man,” as applied to Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels does not only refer to the Semitic idiom meaning, “human one,” but also to the messianic figure derived from Daniel 7.⁴⁷ The Similitudes of Enoch and 4 Ezra show that the figure in Daniel 7 was being interpreted as the messiah by the time of Jesus.⁴⁸ Similar to the figure in these works, in the Synoptic Gospels, the “Son of Man” is an eschatological judge, ruler, advocate, and defender.⁴⁹ In Matthew’s Gospel, for instance, the “Son of Man” refers to an eschatological judge who sits on a throne of glory, ruling over a kingdom.⁵⁰ Luke portrays him as both an eschatological judge in the heavenly court and one who advocates for his faithful followers who have acknowledged him publicly and accuses those who have denied him.⁵¹ In Mark, Jesus has the authority to forgive sins and interpret God’s commands because he is the messiah/king anointed at his baptism. Much like the Suffering Servant, through his suffering Jesus becomes the heavenly Son of Man who will exercise authority when he comes again.⁵²

During his public ministry, Jesus probably saw himself as more of a teacher and prophet in the mode of Isaiah’s Servant than as a kingly messiah of the messianic

⁴⁶ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 141.

⁴⁷ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 156-167.

⁴⁸ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 168.

⁴⁹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 166.

⁵⁰ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 152.

⁵¹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 154.

⁵² Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 150-151.

tradition.⁵³ Yet there seems to have been great pressure, maybe before Jesus' death and resurrection and perhaps after, to make Jesus into the powerful figure of messianic tradition. We see this tension clearly in the Mark 10:32-45 passage referred to at the beginning of this study. In this passage Jesus tells the disciples directly about the suffering he will undergo even to the point of death and about his resurrection after three days. As if not even hearing what Jesus has just said, James and John come forward and ask Jesus to let them sit at his right and left hand in glory.

Attributes of the messiahship tradition of kingship influenced early Christology and became part of the Synoptic Gospel account.⁵⁴ Though Jesus proclaimed the "One like a Son of Man" and the Kingdom associated with him in Daniel 7, he became identified as this figure and associated with this Kingdom.⁵⁵

All of this clearly demonstrates the incorporation of the messianic tradition to explain the political and social reality of Jesus' kingship. Yet, like the writings of Paul, we again see in the gospels that Jesus uses nonviolence to describe his ministry and the character of his kingdom. It is no accident that in Mark 10:45 Jesus alludes to the Suffering Servant. The reign of God has a particular historical dimension that involves the confrontation of worldly rule by God's kingdom. Thus, the nonviolence of God's kingdom that Jesus teaches and preaches is not passive. Walter Wink shows that, far from counseling passivity, Jesus' statements about turning the other cheek, giving the cloak, and going the second mile (Matt. 5:39-41; Luke 6:29) actually teach an assertive and

⁵³ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 167, 171.

⁵⁴ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 173.

⁵⁵ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 174.

confrontational nonviolence that provides an opponent with an opportunity for transformation. With suggestions such as these the oppressed person has the potential to seize the initiative, shame the offender, and strip him of the power to dehumanize.⁵⁶ From this perspective, it is not hard to see how Jesus' actions sound very much like those of Isaiah's Servant, who disarms and transforms his oppressors through nonviolence.

While not compatible with satisfaction or moral influence theories, the Synoptic Gospels are compatible with narrative Christus Victor. As has been demonstrated, the Synoptic Gospels not only incorporate the Suffering Servant tradition but also the messiahship tradition to indicate that Christ's kingship and his kingdom are not just spiritual but social and political realities. Jesus' ministry and the corresponding practice of his followers aligns with the Suffering Servant, and as they do so they "share in the witness of the reign of God against the rule of Satan, personified, as in Revelation, by imperial Rome—a theme [Weaver calls] narrative Christus Victor."⁵⁷ "Jesus' acts of healing on the Sabbath and his encounters with women are integral dimensions of his mission to make the reign of God visible over and against the rule of evil in the social order."⁵⁸

The passion narratives most clearly display the clash of two kingdoms, that of the reign of God with the reign of the world. When soldiers and others come to arrest Jesus, his companions ask, "Lord, should we strike with the sword?" (Luke 22:49) After the high priest's slave's ear is cut off Jesus commands, "No more of this" (Luke 22:51).

⁵⁶ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, The Powers, vol. 3 [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 176-84.

⁵⁷ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 39.

⁵⁸ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 40.

“References to legions of angels that Jesus could call but does not (Matt. 26:53) or to the need ‘to drink the cup that the Father has given me’ (John 18:11) give Jesus’ rejection of the sword an ultimate dimension in the Gospel writers’ view, making it an extension of God’s rule.”⁵⁹

The resurrection, God’s act in history to overcome the ultimate enemy, death, is God’s decisive approval of Christ’s nonviolent reign and its victory. “In the living Jesus the reign of God displayed its power over the ultimate enemy—death—and thus over the worst that evil could do, namely, deny Jesus his existence.”⁶⁰ With the last enemy, death, overcome, Jesus’ followers could commit themselves and publicly pledge their allegiance to his kingdom without fear and continue his ministry to establish it on earth as it is in heaven.

For several reasons, the synoptic gospel accounts are incompatible with satisfaction atonement and moral influence atonement. The synoptic gospel accounts are an earth-centered vision of the reign of God in conflict with and triumphing over the reign of Satan. They do not depict a divinely arranged plan to provide a payment to satisfy the offended honor of God or a requirement of divine law. Unlike Calvin’s penal substitution theory, which will be described in Chapter 4, Jesus is not the substitute bearer of punishment that sinful humankind deserves. Further, the synoptic gospels do not display any requirement of a change in the relationship between God and sinful humankind “based on the assumption of retributive justice that making right or restoring

⁵⁹ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 41.

⁶⁰ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 42.

justice happens when evil deeds are balanced by punishment.”⁶¹ Likewise, moral influence atonement falls short because in the gospel narratives, while the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus results in a crucial transformation in his followers, “calling them to escape from bondage to the powers of Satan and to submit to the rule of God,” the resurrection reveals “the true balance of power in the universe whether sinners perceive it or not.”⁶² Like satisfaction theory, in moral influence theory the resurrection is not normally an integral characteristic. In moral influence theory salvation only occurs when sinners perceive the loving death and respond positively to God. Weaver points out that the fatal flaw of moral influence theory is that the death of Jesus must be an act of God to show love to sinful humankind. “In narrative Christus Victor, the death of Jesus is anything but a loving act of God. It is, rather, the product of evil forces that oppose the reign of God.”⁶³

John’s Gospel and Revelation: A More Exalted Servant Messiah

Belief in Jesus’ preexistence becomes much more developed in John’s Gospel than in the Synoptic Gospels. Like the other Gospels, in John’s Gospel, Jesus is first and foremost the Son of God, meaning the royal Davidic messiah.⁶⁴ Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, though, in John, Jesus’ messiahship and sonship is also elaborated in terms of oneness with the Father.⁶⁵ John’s prologue also portrays Jesus as wisdom or logos.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 46.

⁶² Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 47.

⁶³ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 48.

⁶⁴ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 179, 181.

⁶⁵ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 180.

These aspects of John's Gospel show that the author has some knowledge of Judaic philosophy⁶⁷ and imply that Jesus is a preexistent agent of God who became incarnate.⁶⁸ In both poetic and philosophical ways, John portrays Jesus as preexistent and divine in the sense of being an emanation of God or being a god.⁶⁹

Like the Gospel of John, Revelation portrays Jesus as the divine preexistent messiah, but does so in more ambiguous poetic ways than John does.⁷⁰ Like the Gospel of John, in Revelation, Jesus is portrayed as personified wisdom.⁷¹ In the prologue of Revelation he is described as both the manlike figure in Daniel as well as the Ancient of Days, a name usually applied to God.⁷² The poetic rather than philosophical nature of these affirmations make it difficult to know if the author considered Jesus to be an aspect of God, an emanation from God, or the first creature of God, or considered these issues at all.⁷³ It is unlikely that the author of Revelation wants to identify Christ with God, but is suggesting that Christ participated with God in creation and participates now in the "full manifestation of the rule of God as God's agent."⁷⁴

⁶⁶ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 178.

⁶⁷ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 181.

⁶⁸ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 178.

⁶⁹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 181.

⁷⁰ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 202.

⁷¹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 193, 204.

⁷² Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 194.

⁷³ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 194.

⁷⁴ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 203.

Revelation more closely identifies Jesus with the angelic figure in Daniel 7 than any of the other New Testament writers do.⁷⁵ This figure in Daniel is originally the Archangel Michael, but by Jesus' lifetime the "One like a Son of Man" is being reinterpreted as the heavenly Messiah. Like the Gospel writers, Revelation associates Jesus with this heavenly Messiah, but like Daniel, Revelation portrays the risen Christ as an angelic figure,⁷⁶ an idea that is strongly rejected by the Letter to the Hebrews.⁷⁷ A number of features that normally describe angels or messengers in the Bible are used in Revelation to describe the Messiah.⁷⁸

This heavenly messiah, who is also the principal angel,⁷⁹ conquers evil personified by the Devil,⁸⁰ a theme that is very important for the Christus Victor Theory of the atonement.⁸¹ "The victory song of the heavenly creatures (5:9-10) celebrates the subsequent joining of people of all ethnic and culture groups into a 'kingdom of priests to serve our God,' which 'will reign on earth.' In other words, celebrated here is the victory of the reign of God over the rule of evil which slaughtered the lamb, Christ."⁸²

The resurrection features prominently in Revelation, in a way that makes it compatible with Christus Victor rather than satisfaction atonement or moral influence

⁷⁵ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 28.

⁷⁶ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 192.

⁷⁷ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 189.

⁷⁸ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 191.

⁷⁹ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 203.

⁸⁰ Collins and Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God*, 188.

⁸¹ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 20.

⁸² Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 21.

atonement. The climax of the opening of the seven seals in Revelation 7 is the message of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the “ultimate and definitive cosmic victory of the reign of God over the rule of Satan and the multiple evils that he produces, including war and devastation, famine, pestilence, and natural disasters. This is the victorious Christ, Christus Victor...While the culmination still awaits, a piece of the future exists now.”⁸³

In cosmic terms Revelation depicts life for Christians in the time between his ascension into heaven and his return. “As the struggling and numerically insignificant church contemplates the might of Rome, the temptation is to despair. However, for those who perceive the resurrection of Jesus, the reign of God has already triumphed.”⁸⁴ The empire here is depicted as a dragon, which, though wounded in cosmic battle, still has the potential to harm the church (12:10-12). Christians are not able to buy and sell without the beast’s mark, symbolizing “allegiance to an economic system and an authority that is not built on Jesus Christ. In contrast, God’s people follow the slain lamb—Christ—wherever he goes.”⁸⁵ The culmination of Revelation occurs in chapter 21, with the vision of a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem. “The Fall of Babylon, representing Rome (ch. 18), and the emergence of the New Jerusalem, representing the church of God, constitutes the climactic symbol of the triumph of the reign of God in the book of Revelation.”⁸⁶

Given the importance of the resurrection in Revelation and the symbolic cosmic depiction of the earthly nonviolent confrontation of the church with the Roman Empire,

⁸³ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 22.

⁸⁴ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 28.

⁸⁵ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 29.

⁸⁶ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 31.

Revelation clearly supports narrative Christus Victor over the other atonement theories. Moreover, Christ is portrayed in ways reflecting the messiahship tradition, and therefore his community is portrayed as an alternative social structure to that of the Greco-Roman Empire, each of which demands one to make a decision of ultimate loyalty over the other. For all of these reasons, insofar as “Revelation supports a theory of atonement, it clearly supports a narrative Christus Victor model over Anselm’s satisfaction theory.”⁸⁷

In this chapter we have seen that as the first Christians reflected on their experience with Christ, they drew heavily on the messiahship and Suffering Servant traditions to form their Christology. The New Testament vision of atonement is one in which Christ comes as king and incorporates his followers into his kingdom. He is no ordinary king, though, and rather than engaging in practices of domination through the power of violence, as a servant teacher he rules through the power of self-sacrificing love. He calls his followers to faithfulness through patterning their own lives on his self-sacrifice and nonviolence. His life, death and resurrection conquer sin and death and offer his followers the opportunity to do that. The next chapter’s study of the three families of atonement will show that the satisfaction family of theories is as deeply flawed as it is incompatible with scripture. It will also show that narrative Christus Victor is the theory of atonement that bears witness to the New Testament’s description of the life, death, and resurrection of the Servant Messiah.

⁸⁷ Loren L. Johns, “Atonement and Sacrifice in the Book of Revelation,” in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective: Essays in Honor of J. Denny Weaver*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast (Telford: Cascadia; Scottdale: Herald, 2008), 125.

Chapter 3

Development of the Three Families of Atonement Theories and Critique of the Satisfaction Family of Atonement Theories

In this chapter I will examine the origins of the three families of atonement theories,¹ their sources of strength, and their fundamental flaws. The next chapter will build upon this one by examining the penal substitution theory espoused by John Calvin. In the next chapter, I will also show that retributivist penal theory and the family of satisfaction theologies, especially penal substitution theory, are dependent upon one another.

Christus Victor Theory

The prevailing view found in early church theologians is now known as Christus Victor. “This atonement image used the image of a cosmic battle between good and evil, between the forces of God and Satan. In that fray God’s son Jesus Christ was killed, an apparent defeat of God and victory by Satan. However, Jesus’ resurrection turned the seeming defeat into a great victory, which forever revealed God’s control of the universe and freed sinful humans from the power of sin and Satan.”² According to this view, the Devil holds humans in his power because the first man, Adam, yielded himself to the Devil’s authority by an act of voluntary obedience. Being perfectly just, God respects the

¹ Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishing, 2003).

² J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 54.

devil's rights and will not free sinners by force. Instead he ransoms them from captivity at the price of Christ's blood.³

One of the most common versions of Christus Victor in the Early Church (the Church of the first through the fourth centuries A.D.) is the story of Jesus saving his people by tricking the Devil. According to this view, suffering, death and all evil come from the Devil. The reason that we all suffer and die is because we are in the Devil's power. Jesus, being fully human, also had to die. According to this view, the Resurrection is important because in the Resurrection the Devil is tricked in that he does not understand the extent of Jesus' power which is greater than the Devil's ultimate power of death. Jesus is victorious over the Devil and thus conquers the Devil's power, death. This saves Jesus' followers because they are in Christ.

As will be discussed more fully in the final chapter, the sacraments play an important role in the Christus Victor family of atonement theories. Baptism is important because it signifies the putting on of Christ. Similarly, the Eucharist signifies having Christ and thus his power in the worshiper. In his total victory, Christ also becomes the all-powerful King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Therefore, the political implications, which the previous chapter showed are displayed so clearly in the writings of the New Testament, are integral to this theory of the atonement. Ultimate allegiance shifts from Caesar to Jesus. Further, there are ethical dimensions to this theory because the Resurrection affirms the life of Jesus. The follower of Jesus can imitate his life, including

³ Philip L. Quinn, "Abelard on Atonement: 'Nothing Unintelligible, Arbitrary, Illogical, or Immoral about It,'" in *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, edited by Eleonore Stump (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 285.

risking nonviolent approaches to violence and oppression, because Christ has already conquered all suffering, death, and evil.

This chapter will argue that a revised version of Christus Victor is the only theory that is compatible with the messianic and Suffering Servant traditions that are synthesized in the New Testament. Therefore, a Christian approach to prisons and the death penalty in particular should be based on Christus Victor rather than satisfaction or moral influence theories.

It is worth noting here, as I did in the previous chapter, that although Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and the messiahship tradition contain no developed atonement theology per se, my previous chapter extensively showed that both the Suffering Servant Poem and the messiahship tradition lend themselves to a type of “Christus Victor” reading. I say that hesitantly knowing that I risk shocking the reader. In no way am I implying that a particular Christian theology is present in Old Testament texts and traditions. My argument is simply that some of the same Christus Victor themes that I have explicated in this thesis so far are present in the images, metaphors, and narratives of the messiahship and Suffering Servant traditions. This should come as no surprise given that this thesis traces major atonement motifs from the Suffering Servant and messiahship traditions through the New Testament and finally into the three families of atonement theology.

Bearing these qualifications in mind, my previous chapter showed that the Suffering Servant Poem can be read in a “Christus Victor” kind of way in that it describes the redemption of the whole people of Israel as they emerge from Babylonian captivity, which they have experienced as a kind of death. Now facing the prospect of a return home, they find life in their renewed relationship with God. In this interpretation, the

Servant, whose nonviolent work brings about redemption through his sacrificial life, death, and ultimate vindication by God, can be viewed as either an individual leader, the personification of the community as a whole, or both.

Similarly, there are obvious parallels between the messiahship tradition and the Christus Victor theory. Like the Christus Victor family of theories,⁴ in the messiahship tradition a divine figure anointed and sent by God balances out the lack of power of God's people. The messiah rescues God's people by breaking whatever bonds prevent them from experiencing the full life that God intends for them to have. The Christus Victor family of theories is the only group of atonement theologies among the three families that shares motifs with both the messiahship and the Suffering Servant traditions.

Satisfaction Theory

In 1098 Anselm published *Cur Deus Homo?*, partly in response to non-Christian objectors to Christianity, “widely agreed to be Jews”⁵ and Muslims⁶ who felt that ideas of incarnation or crucifixion meant a dishonoring of God. Anselm's concern was also to critique theories of Christus Victor current since the early Church, which seemed to imply that the Devil had rights over human beings. Non-Christian objectors asked, “Why was the death of the son of God necessary?” Other Christians from the earliest times had

⁴ Early Church proponents of these theories include all of the Greek Church Fathers, including Irenaeus (Gaul, early second century-202), John of Damascus (675-749), Origen (Alexandria, 184-254), Athanasius (Alexandria, 296-373), Basil the Great (Caesarea, 329-379), Gregory of Nyssa (335-395), Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390), and John Chrysostom (Constantinople, 349-407). Christus Victor was also the dominant view among the Latin Fathers of the Patristic period, including Ambrose (Milan, 340-397), Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Leo the Great (Rome, 400-461), and Gregory the Great (Rome, 540-604).

⁵ Timothy Gorrige, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence and the Rhetoric of Salvation*, Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion, no. 9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 90.

⁶ David Brown, “Anselm on Atonement,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, edited by Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 283.

answered the question with a version of Christus Victor that argued for the need to trick the Devil. According to this view, the Devil acquired rights over humankind in the Fall. Because Anselm found the idea that the Devil had any rights over people to be objectionable he felt that there needed to be a new answer for the necessity of Christ's death.

In *Cur Deus Homo?* Anselm argues that a mere man could not save us because then we would just serve him rather than God. He refutes the idea that the Devil has any rights and thereby for the first time takes the Devil completely out of the atonement equation.

Many contemporary scholars of Anselm are divided over the degree to which his theory of the atonement is based on scripture, especially the gospel accounts. Many point to the feudalism of his society, or the Platonism that was popular among many intellectuals in the eleventh century to argue that they are the primary sources of his theology. Timothy Gorringer and J. Denny Weaver, for example, argue that Anselm's theory is based primarily on feudalism. David Brown, however, argues that scripture is foundational to Anselm's theory even if Anselm does not make explicit references to scripture in *Cur Deus Homo?*⁷

As I will show, this thesis agrees with Gorringer and Weaver's position that Anselm's theory is primarily based on the feudal system of his time, rather than the accounts of Christ's life, death, and resurrection found in the New Testament. An important piece of evidence to support this hypothesis is that the central metaphor of satisfaction theory is drawn not from scripture, but from feudalism. According to

⁷ Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," 286.

Anselm, sin is the infringement of God's honor because it is the failure to render God his due, which is to love the highest good for its own sake and nothing else.⁸ Since it is a feudal metaphor at the heart of Anselm's theory rather than a scriptural one, it is important to understand the feudal system in which he lived in order to understand Anselm's thought. Feudalism was formally and solidly established under Norman rule shortly before Anselm arrived in England.⁹ Under this system there was no distinction between private and public property or law. In such a system, all wrongdoing was an attack on the community. The punishment was often violent and quite frequently it was a horrible death. Before the Normans came to England, though, penalties for all wrongdoing were primarily fines. "The system had been encouraged by the church to avoid the death penalty, but had far reaching social effects. Those who could not pay were either outlawed or sold as slaves."¹⁰ Thus, pre-Norman punishments were still often oppressive, but there was a policy in place that had been supported by the church that was intended to limit violent consequences for wrongdoing. With Norman rule, the legal system became horrendously violent and cruel.

The law of Anselm's feudalistic society mandated different consequences for wrongdoing depending on the stations in society of both the victim and the accused. One peasant striking another, for example, might only call for a mutual pardon. A blow from a peasant to a king, though, "would threaten the integrity of the whole social order and demand the death sentence. What then of an offence directed against an infinite being,

⁸ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 93.

⁹ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 88.

¹⁰ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 89.

God? Because we owe God our total obedience, even the most trivial offense demands an infinite satisfaction.”¹¹ Anselm argues that God cannot simply forgive sinners any more than a king could simply forgive a peasant because that would mean societal disorder.

Although some argue that Anselm’s theory is derived more from scripture than it is from the feudal model, there is little evidence to support this argument and so much evidence that directly contradicts it. David Brown, for example, argues that the critics of *Cur Deus Homo?* often do not correctly read it with its historical context in mind. If they did, they would see that scripture does, in fact, influence it. Brown argues that they would also understand that Anselm is not committed to a narrow theory of retribution, what some have called “rationalized vengeance.”¹²

According to Brown, scripture lies just below the surface of Anselm’s arguments. For example, in explaining Anselm’s view of justice Brown states, “for Anselm, God cannot be portrayed as acting now in one way, now in another: punishing, according to the Bible, fallen angels and human beings who are irrevocably wicked, yet allowing others (the forgiven) apparently to escape all consequences of their sins.” Brown argues that this kind of consistency, which he believes is taken directly from the Bible, is intrinsic to how Anselm understands God’s justice. Brown may be correct that scripture does to a large degree inform Anselm’s view of divine justice. Yet, this view, whether Brown’s or Anselm’s, does not take into account the many examples in scripture in

¹¹ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 93.

¹² Brown, “Anselm on Atonement,” 284.

which God is inconsistent, such as when God's mind, once firmly made up to punish, is changed through the mediation of an individual.¹³

Moreover, in this view of consistent justice, God is limited by an abstract and arbitrary law of justice and that violates God's freedom. The concept of justice meted out by the law is certainly present in scripture. Indeed, even God willingly enters the Covenant with its binding requirements upon God.¹⁴ According to Brown, it is in this sense of God voluntarily constraining Godself that Anselm believes that God is bound by divine justice. Anselm believes that there can be no external constraints on God, but he thinks that there is an internal constraint on the divine nature in which God not only always acts consistently but also "fittingly."¹⁵ In the same way, Brown points out that according to Anselm, Jesus "was bound by what he wished," not by some cold law. His acceptance of his incarnation and death was what a perfect person would voluntarily do.¹⁶

Brown makes some valid points to successfully refute the charge of many of Anselm's critics that his theory portrays a heartless and angry God who, in order to be placated, demands the death of an innocent victim. Yet Brown does not fully exonerate Anselm on this point. The idea that God is voluntarily constrained by God's own internal justice, both as judge and victim, is still problematic. For one thing, it still leaves us with an image of God as a cosmic judge (or a feudal lord) bound, voluntarily or not, by an abstract concept of the law. That image is certainly not a dominant one in scripture, if it is

¹³ Exodus 21:14 is just one of many examples: "And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people."

¹⁴ See the detailed contract language and ritual of covenant making between God and Abraham in Genesis 15.

¹⁵ Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," 296.

¹⁶ Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," 296.

present at all. Rather, the portrayals of God that arise in both the Old and New Testaments to describe how God responds to wrongdoing are not based in the consistent application of divine law but in intimate loving relationship, such as that of the lover-beloved depicted by the prophets, or the parent-child described by Jesus.¹⁷

Brown also argues that scripture must have been at the forefront of Anselm's thought as he wrote *Cur Deus Homo?* because, as a Benedictine monk, Anselm's reading and study would have been first and foremost in scripture, as is required by the Rule of Benedict.¹⁸ Lastly, and perhaps most importantly for Brown's argument, he points out that Anselm explicitly states that nothing he says should be inconsistent with scripture, which is supremely authoritative, and anything that contradicts it should be discarded.¹⁹

Yet Brown's argument on these points is also not persuasive for several reasons. First, surely the scriptural witness of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ would have been mentioned throughout *Cur Deus Homo?* if Anselm had thought it was important to base his theology on the gospel accounts, let alone the rest of scripture. Second, Brown's argument that a lack of contradiction of scripture equals support of scripture is spurious on the face of it. Brown's point that Anselm must have had a very high view of scripture, while germane and worth bearing in mind, is insufficient to conclude that *Cur Deus Homo?* is scripturally based, especially when there is so much evidence that suggests just the opposite.

On the other hand, the evidence of a direct connection between Anselm's theory and feudalism is plentiful throughout *Cur Deus Homo?* Anselm answers the question of

¹⁷ Luke 15:11-32 is just one of many examples.

¹⁸ Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," 286.

¹⁹ Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," 283.

why the incarnation and death of Jesus was necessary not by referring to scripture but by continuing with the feudal metaphor. As noted above, Anselm argues that the need for the incarnation and death of God's Son springs from the demands of justice. Yet how Anselm defines justice sounds exactly like the feudalistic concept of justice, not a supposedly scriptural view of God's consistency. In fact, Anselm clearly defines justice based on the legal system of his day rather than scripture because he uses the concept of satisfaction. Either humankind will be punished by eternal death or satisfaction must be paid. Satisfaction was part of the legal system of Anselm's society. Eleventh century law offered the offender several options for punishment: to be outlawed, to be subject to private vengeance, to be punished by death or mutilation, or to make satisfaction. "In Roman law, just being rediscovered in the schools of Pavia and Bologna, satisfaction referred to compensation to an injured person other than by direct payment...It is against this background that we must understand Anselm's introduction of a new metaphor for understanding the work of Christ – satisfaction."²⁰

According to Anselm, sinners have nothing with which to make satisfaction to an infinite being because we owe God everything: "If in justice I owe to God myself and all my powers even when I do not sin, I have nothing left to render to him for my sin."²¹ Since sin against an infinite being is itself infinite, only an infinite being could make satisfaction.²² Compassion without satisfaction is not possible because God is bound by God's justice, which allows nothing but satisfaction as the recompense of sin.²³ Further

²⁰ Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance*, 89.

²¹ Anselm quoted by Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," 280.

²² Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance*, 96.

²³ Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance*, 95.

adding to the problem is that because it is human beings who have breached God's honor, we need one who is both God and human because only such a person can make restitution.²⁴ Thus, the need for the incarnation and death of Christ, because only a figure who is both fully God and fully human can live a perfect human life and therefore make the satisfaction necessary for everyone else.

In Anselm's theory, Jesus' work of atonement has nothing to do with his ministry or his resurrection. All that is required in his view to make atonement between God and humanity is the God-man's free choice to be obedient and live a consistently perfect life, which led to his execution. It is the offering of that perfect life that makes satisfaction.

A fundamental flaw of Anselm's theory is its' lack of dependence on the resurrection, which, of course, is a result of Anselm neglecting to base it on New Testament writers' witness to their experience of Christ. In Anselm's view, all that is required is the transaction that occurs when God's Son lives a perfect life, which is then offered at his death. Moreover, except for his free choice to be obedient to God, Jesus' ministry is ignored in this theory. As a result of this omission, there is little, if any, ethical call for the believer to become a follower, patterning her life on that of Christ.

Besides drawing on feudalism, *Cur Deus Homo?* is also Neoplatonic in that it "theorizes the importance of fittingness, order, and beauty which the social order must exemplify."²⁵ In this view, beauty is always thought of in terms of balance.²⁶ For example, *Cur Deus Homo* stresses Platonic ideas as it stresses the "unfitness" in our

²⁴ Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," 280.

²⁵ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 96.

²⁶ Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," 285.

accepting forgiveness without compensation being paid, no less than in God offering it unconditionally. The result would be an “unseemliness” that violated the “beauty of the arrangement.”²⁷ In other words, it would be out of balance for God to forgive without compensation. For Anselm, morality consists in conformity to God’s good order.²⁸ God is not free to do whatever God chooses because God must act in accordance with God’s dignity and choose ‘what is best and fitting.’

Brown again argues that scripture supports Anselm’s concern for Platonic beauty.²⁹ Yet in the gospels, which this thesis argues must form the basis of Christian atonement theology, Jesus demonstrates a type of ‘beauty’ with regard to forgiveness that is the opposite of this kind of balance. For example, when someone comes to him for healing, Jesus will often forgive the person first even though no one has even asked Jesus for forgiveness. Further, after his resurrection, Jesus will forgive the disciples who had abandoned him at his crucifixion.

Given that the social structures and systems of Anselm’s society provide the rationale for his theory, it is no surprise that rather than challenging those systems and structures, his theory would support them. Since Anselm does not draw on the scriptural portrayal of the God who enters and is involved in human history, his theory is completely ahistorical and “operates at a level of dazzling legal and aesthetic abstraction, far above the hurly-burly of conquest, expropriation, and murder in which he lived.”³⁰

²⁷ Brown, “Anselm on Atonement,” 284.

²⁸ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 97.

²⁹ Brown, “Anselm on Atonement,” 285, 288.

³⁰ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 100.

Brown points to Anselm's devotional poetry, such as his prayer that Christ's love would seize his whole being, to argue that Anselm's theology of atonement is concerned with the transformed character and moral life of the believer.³¹ Yet a lack of specificity about what "Christ's love" entails shows just how completely removed from imitation of Christ and Christian ethics Anselm's theology is. Anselm's poetry, like all such devotional literature that expresses an individualized and abstract spirituality removed from the needs of the world, powerfully reinforces Anselm's theology. In both, there is no challenge to the structures of power in society, let alone the monarchs, aristocracy, archbishops and bishops who benefit from those structures.

An example of this abstraction is that for Anselm, the incarnation is just a metaphysical reality rather than an indication that God has entered fully into human history. Anselm's theology is for an ideal world as Anselm conceives it, which looks very much like the world in which Anselm lives, the world of the social elite. By contrast, the witness of Scripture comes from the marginalized and describes God's work on their behalf. Anselm's theory puts the ruling class in the favorable position of being analogous to the ultimate ruler of the universe. The lower classes are put in the position of being analogous to the sinner. "The legal system of Anselm's day profoundly underscored class division. Anselm's analogy did not as analogies sometimes do, critique this system, but reinforced it."³² It is no surprise then that the dominant systems of religious education and communication would come to support and ultimately firmly establish Anselm's theory. The "profound integration of church and state, secular and sacred, at this period

³¹ Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," 290.

³² Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 101.

means that [Anselm] must be recognized, even in his theology, as one of the most important spokesmen of the ruling class of his day.”³³

Moreover, Anselm’s theory calls into question God’s character. The picture of God as portrayed in satisfaction theory, I believe, is that of a remarkably weak figure as compared to the way that Christus Victor portrays God. Anselm’s theory pictures God as a medieval Lord, incensed at the injury done to his honor, who will not let go of his wrath until he has received an at least adequately equivalent satisfaction.³⁴ This weak figure cannot forgive out of love and compassion but instead needs payment in order to do it. This figure is powerless over Anselm’s view of divine justice, and must act according to this law rather than his character.

As I will show in the next chapter, for several reasons Anselm’s theory is not a penal theory of the atonement. The reformers, especially John Calvin, would later use satisfaction atonement to stress Christ’s death as penal suffering.³⁵ In the centuries that followed, others built on the work of Calvin to develop satisfaction theory within a strong legal and penal framework.³⁶ According to this view, Christ’s sufferings were the penalty of the law executed on Christ as the sinner’s substitute. Thus, the satisfaction shifted from divine honor to divine law and God became either trial judge or prosecuting attorney. The following chapter will argue that this development of satisfaction theory has greatly influenced penal theory and prison philosophy and vice versa, much like Anselm was influenced by the feudal system in which he lived.

³³ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 87.

³⁴ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 101.

³⁵ Brown, “Anselm on Atonement,” 296.

³⁶ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 126-219.

Anselm's theory is not strictly penal, though, because it is Christ's voluntary offering of his perfect life that makes satisfaction, not his suffering of penalty. Nevertheless, the need for death arises from the demand for justice. "Rather than transcending law, God is infinite law, law in himself. What is divinized is the power of law, an intrinsically alienating reality."³⁷ Anselm's theory paves the way for penal theory, which will pave the way for "the validation of criminal law as the instrument of God's justice instead of what it is in the gospel, an alienating construction which is at best a tragic necessity."³⁸

It is worth noting here that there appear to be no obvious themes in the families of satisfaction theology that are also present in the Suffering Servant and messiahship traditions. One might argue, as indeed many have and often still do, that the Suffering Servant Poem can be read in a "satisfaction" kind of way if one interprets the text to say that the Servant is literally an '*asam* and *hatta*'*t*, the animals of the guilt offering and scapegoat rituals. In Chapter One, though, I showed that these interpretations take the Eulogist's metaphors of sacrifice too far. Therefore, a "satisfaction" interpretation is more than the text of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 will bear.

Moral Influence Theory

Peter Abelard (1079-1142) developed his moral influence theory, also known as the subjective view, as a specific alternative to Anselm's theory. "For Abelard, the problem of atonement was not how to change an offended God's mind toward the sinner, but how to bring sinful humankind to see that the God they perceived as harsh and

³⁷ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 102.

³⁸ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 102-103.

judgmental was actually loving. Thus for Abelard, Jesus died as the demonstration of God's love. And the change that results from that loving death is not in God but in the subjective consciousness of the sinners, who repent and cease their rebellion against God and turn toward God."³⁹

Like Anselm, Abelard argues against Christus Victor. He has three primary objections to the idea in Christus Victor that the Devil has any rights over people. First, in Abelard's view, Christ redeemed only the elect, who were never in the devil's power in the first place. Second, the Devil never had any rights over people because he secured them by a lying promise of immortality. Since the Devil could not live up to his end of the bargain, he gained no rights over people. Abelard's third objection is an echo of a point Anselm had made earlier: God may have given the Devil permission to torture humans by way of punishment for their sins, but that doesn't mean that the devil has the right to hold humans in bondage.⁴⁰

Abelard argues that God is not prevented from forgiving sins by the Devil's supposed rights because scripture repeatedly shows that God voluntarily chooses to forgive sins. In the case of the paralytic, as one of many examples, Jesus voluntarily chooses to forgive long before his death and resurrection. Therefore, there is no need to ransom sinners from the Devil. "The devil has no rights over them which God must in justice respect, and God can retract the devil's permission to punish simply by forgiving

³⁹ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 19.

⁴⁰ Quinn, "Abelard on Atonement," 285-286.

them and remitting the punishment.” Here we see a distinct difference between Abelard and Anselm in Abelard’s frequent reference to scripture to support his theology.⁴¹

Having dispensed with certain aspects of *Christus Victor*, Abelard points out many of the fundamental flaws of satisfaction theory. First, he shows the weakness in the central metaphor. Just as Christ’s death cannot be payment to the Devil, it cannot be payment to God because it would be inconsistent with God’s goodness that such a price would be demanded: “How cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should in any way please him that an innocent man should be slain—still less that God should consider the death of his Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world!”⁴²

Abelard also points out that satisfaction theory is flawed because it compromises God’s freedom. If God needs satisfaction then there is some necessity over and above God’s will. Abelard asks, if Christ’s death is necessary, where did the necessity come from? Here we see an important difference between Anselm and Abelard in that Abelard makes God’s freedom an absolute value rather than seeing it as limited by an idea of God’s justice derived from God’s inner being of righteousness.

Abelard then shifts the question from Anselm’s question, “Why did there have to be a God-Man?” to “Why was it necessary for Christ to die?” Abelard’s answer is very different from Anselm’s: “Our redemption through Christ’s suffering is that deeper affection [*dilectio*] in us which not only frees us from slavery to sin, but also wins for us the true liberty of sons of God, so that we do all things out of love rather than fear—love

⁴¹ Quinn, “Abelard on Atonement,” 286.

⁴² Abelard, quoted by Quinn, “Abelard on Atonement,” 286-287.

to him who has shown us such great grace that no greater can be found, as he himself asserts, saying, ‘Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his love for his friends.’⁴³

Many contemporary scholars, such as Gorringer and Weaver, argue as many of Abelard’s own critics did that he was committed to the “exemplarist” view that Christ’s life and death were no more than an inspiring example, a paradigm of Christian existence.⁴⁴ Others, though, argue that the truth is more complicated than that, and what Abelard did say is not clear enough to make such a charge. Philip Quinn, for example, states that while the exemplarist motif is dominant for Abelard, it is not his only theme and Abelard does not exclude other aspects of the atonement. Quinn states that on this matter Abelard differs with other theologians [not] “so much over which motifs should be included in a fairly comprehensive account of the Atonement as over the more delicate matter of which themes are most important and need to be highlighted.”⁴⁵

Quinn agrees with other scholars that for Abelard, people could only be redeemed if the Son of God became human to instruct us and demonstrate his love which we would then adopt.⁴⁶ “It does seem fair to say that the dominant motif in Abelard’s account is the power of love in us through Christ’s Passion to transform us both through freeing us from slavery to sin and, more important, by winning for us the positive Christian liberty to do all things out of love for God.”⁴⁷ Yet according to Quinn, Abelard’s theology shares

⁴³ Abelard, quoted from his Commentary on Romans 3 by Quinn, “Abelard on Atonement,” 287.

⁴⁴ Quinn, “Abelard on Atonement,” 282.

⁴⁵ Quinn, “Abelard on Atonement,” 284.

⁴⁶ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 111.

⁴⁷ Quinn, “Abelard on Atonement,” 291.

Anselm and Aquinas' motif of satisfying a debt to God. The difference for Abelard, though, is that this motif is relegated to secondary status: "Godward aspects of atonement, such as paying a debt of punishment owed to divine retributive justice, are relegated to distinctly subordinate roles in Abelard's account."⁴⁸ Therefore, rather than describing Abelard as purely an exemplarist, he is best described as a hierarchical pluralist. Like Aquinas, his atonement has a dominant motif to which others are subordinated. Where Abelard and Aquinas differ is that for Aquinas, the dominant theme is the satisfaction of sin. For Abelard, the dominant theme is the love that transforms motive and character in the redeemed heart.⁴⁹

Even in the twelfth century, Abelard's theory was construed as exemplarism⁵⁰ even though Abelard states over and over that we are redeemed by God's grace rather than by our own will, works, or merits. Quinn grants that there are tendencies in the exemplarist direction in Abelard's theory. He also states that moral influence theory injected a fresh motif in the medieval discussion about the effects of Christ's life, suffering, and death that continues to this day. Therefore, it makes sense to identify this motif with him even if it does not fully define his atonement theology.⁵¹

Because Abelard's argument on the atonement was partly misunderstood as pure exemplarism rather than the nuance contained in Abelard's true theory, it "is probably the origin of a very different tradition which, as Bernard feared, viewed the historical Jesus

⁴⁸ Quinn, "Abelard on Atonement," 291.

⁴⁹ Quinn, "Abelard on Atonement," 292.

⁵⁰ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 111.

⁵¹ Quinn, "Abelard on Atonement," 295.

as our exemplar in the life of faith.”⁵² According to Bernard: “If Christ’s benefit consisted only in the display of works, it remains to say that Adam harmed us only by the display of sin.”⁵³ Yet, here a close reading of Abelard shows that Bernard’s statement makes its own counterargument. For Abelard, Christ’s example is more than just a “display of works” that anyone could do. Rather, it is a *perfect* example infused with God’s grace, much like that of the Suffering Servant, and therein lies its power. Abelard considers what Bernard calls Christ’s “display of works” to be the display of the love that is “a spiritual force exerted by the lover on the beloved, and, in a responsive heart, setting up a reflex, which tends to become permanent.”⁵⁴ Further, while Abelard emphasizes the importance of Christ’s transforming love displayed in his life and death, he never presents “the atonement as nothing more than an inducement for man to effect his own salvation.”⁵⁵

Weaver argues that moral influence atonement is flawed in part because, like satisfaction atonement, Christ’s resurrection is not intrinsic to the theory.⁵⁶ In Abelard’s theory, we are saved through the example of the love displayed in Christ’s life and death for us. Therefore there is no need for the resurrection at all. Another similarity between satisfaction theory and moral influence theory is that in both the violence of Jesus’ execution is validated, in this case primarily as a means for showing God’s love. Yet

⁵² Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 117.

⁵³ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Tractus ad Innocentium II Pontificem contra quaedam capitula errorum Abelardi*, quoted in Gensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1962), 106

⁵⁴ Robert O.P. Taylor, “Was Abelard an Exemplarist?” *Theology* 31 (1935), 212.

⁵⁵ Richard E. Weingart, *The Logic of Divine Love: A Critical Analysis of the Soteriology of Peter Abelard* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 150.

⁵⁶ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 20.

unlike satisfaction theory, there is an ethical dimension to Abelard's theory: "[T]he dominant motif in Abelard's account is the power of love in us through Christ's Passion to transform us both through freeing us from slavery to sin and, more important, by winning for us the positive Christian liberty to do all things out of love for God."⁵⁷

It should be noted that Chapter One extensively showed that the Suffering Servant Poem lends itself in one sense to a type of "moral influence" reading. This reading of the Suffering Servant Poem focuses on the conversion of the Eulogist, the community of the Servant's disciples, Israel, and finally the nations of the world. This conversion takes place through witness of the Servant's sacrificial work, even in the face of suffering and death. Conversion leads to redemption as the Servant's vocation is passed on to those who witness to his sacrificial love. Therefore, it is through the Servant's teaching, life, and sacrificial death his followers are able to move past the hardness of heart referred to throughout Isaiah and into the life God intends for them. These aspects of moral influence theory that emphasize the power of Christ's sacrificial love to transform the lives of his followers are an important contribution to atonement theology. Although they are considered part of the narrative Christus Victor theory that this thesis argues for, they are incomplete by themselves.

In this chapter, I have endeavored to show that Anselm's atonement theory is deeply flawed. These flaws are primarily rooted in the lack of scriptural support for its theological claims. At the same time, narrative Christus Victor, in which, as I mentioned above, I include aspects of moral influence theory, is deeply rooted in scripture, and expresses the witness of the New Testament to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. In the following chapter, I will build on this one by discussing the relationship between

⁵⁷ Quinn, "Abelard on Atonement", 291.

penal substitution theory and retributivist penal practices, particularly the death penalty, as they developed together and influenced each other.

Chapter 4

The Interaction of Atonement Theologies, Especially Penal Substitution, with Prison Philosophy and Penal Theory, and the Development of the American System of Mass Incarceration

Development of Law

While there was tremendous development in atonement theology during the period when Anselm and Abelard were writing, there was also tremendous development of legal philosophy, and both interacted with each other to a great extent. Theologians, Abelard among them, distinguished between *criminalia*, serious sins committed willfully and knowingly, and *venialia aut levia*, sins which can be dealt with by confession and penance.¹

All over Europe there was a change which has “justly been described as a legal revolution, in which crime comes to be defined as categorically different from other wrongs, deserving of special procedures in which punishment is the normal outcome.”² The state was beginning to establish itself with its own legal personality, assuming the responsibility, and finally the monopoly, of response to crime.

Since Aquinas’s atonement theology is so similar to that of Anselm,³ it is not integral to my thesis and will not be discussed separately, but it is important to note that Aquinas provides the jurisprudential foundations for the development of statute law. “Justifying the need to obey the sovereign was a key concern in the thirteenth century, when anarchy and lawlessness was a

¹ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 121.

² Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 123.

³ Where Aquinas and Anselm differ is in their understanding of the divine nature: “The major difference is in the former’s insistence that there are a number of other ways that God could have acted to achieve the same end, for ‘nothing is impossible with God.’” David Brown, “Anselm on Atonement,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, edited by Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 296.

perpetual problem.”⁴ Aquinas for the first time sees the state as a natural, not conventional institution, a positive good, rather than a bulwark against sin. In his view, legislators should seek to express eternal law in their earthly laws. “Punishment meted out by the state in maintenance of law and order is metaphysically justified.”⁵

It is striking that, for Aquinas, whose atonement theology best fits within the satisfaction family, did not view the punishment of an offender as a way of making satisfaction. Rather, according to Aquinas, punishment should be governed by the principle that all things ought to be directed toward their appropriate ends: “The justice of punishment then depends on whether it is directed toward the end of teaching an offender to live justly through the means of specific deterrence and rehabilitation.”⁶ In Aquinas’s view, ideally, punishment results in the offender’s recommitment to the common good.⁷ Aquinas allows for a role for retribution, but only secondarily, following the “medicinal” qualities of punishment. Punishment is medicinal only in its benefit to the broader community through deterrence. For Aquinas, the purpose of punishment ought never to be punishment in and of itself, but deterrence and correction, which is based not on a “strange Kantian principle of proportionality that answers bad act with bad act.”⁸ Rather, the amount of punishment is based on the degree to which the offender’s will requires correction:

⁴ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 124.

⁵ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 124.

⁶ Amy Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society: A Liturgical and Sacramental Response to Mass Incarceration*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2014), 49.

⁷ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 50-55.

⁸ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 51.

“What matters then is not the *kind* of crime committed, but the *degree* to which the criminal’s will encroached upon the common good in the commission of the crime.”⁹

Thus, for Aquinas, punishment is given to repair the offender’s will, not to even the score: “the justification of punishment is that the person has violated the common good and that a response from the community is necessary to restore the well-being of all community members, especially victims, and to enable offenders to reorient themselves to the common good.”¹⁰

Despite this contribution from Thomas Aquinas on punishment and the changes in sensibility in the European culture, especially the identification of Christ with suffering, there was not much evidence of a growth in mercy being reflected in the law. Instead, there was increasing legal savagery from the time of Aquinas into the Reformation.¹¹ One reason for this may be that the same depiction of Christ’s suffering, which could be interpreted as God’s love, mercy, forgiveness, and solidarity described by Abelard, could also be incorrectly interpreted as the punishment that satisfied the wrath of God or God’s divine law. The development of law would run parallel to Anselm because his theology greatly strengthened the systems and structures of power within society. We find in Abelard a strong current flowing in the opposite direction, but it took centuries before it produced significant changes in penal practice.¹²

⁹ Peter Karl Koritansky, *Thomas Aquinas and the Philosophy of Punishment* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 51.

¹⁰ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 57.

¹¹ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 125.

¹² Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 125.

Development of Penal Substitution Atonement Theory and Secular Penal Theory

Gorringer makes some important connections between religion and the law that help to illuminate the way that penal substitution theory and secular penal theory will influence and even be dependent on one another. He points out that they are related at the deepest level “as being equally concerned with the question of what it is which enables and sustains human community.”¹³ All theories of law are concerned with setting out the conditions under which the life of a given community is thought to be sustainable. In different ways, both law and religion give a vision of life together in human community. Finally, religion is concerned with law because both are concerned with the common good.¹⁴

There are also obvious connections between the ideas of sin and crime. In the Bible sin is always something which in one way or another damages human life...Many theologians have insisted on a distinction between sin and crime on the grounds that crime refers only to breaches of human law, whereas sin springs from indifference to, or rebellion against, God. The difficulty with such distinctions is that, as Jesus and the Scriptural authors repeatedly insist, honouring God is bound up with honouring our neighbor, and vice versa. We can distinguish sin and crime on the ground that there are unjust laws; it is less easy to do so on the ground that some acts have a reference to God which others lack.¹⁵

It is this interrelation of sin and crime, the legal and the moral, which underlies the relationship between penal substitution atonement and penal practice.

Bearing all of this in mind, we move on to examine, the two most consequential changes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the beginning of Calvinism and the growth of the nation-state, which provided a safe place for Protestantism to develop and thus saved it.¹⁶ At this time the old honor system was replaced by the advent of contract theory and political absolutism

¹³ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 13.

¹⁴ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 17.

¹⁵ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 20-21.

¹⁶ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 127.

advocated by Machiavelli.¹⁷ Judicial power transferred from the local community to officers of the state. Community law had been, “by and large, reconciliatory and compensation based, whereas state law relied more on punitive justice.”¹⁸

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries crime and dissent were dealt with savagely. Common punishments included mutilation, burning, and hanging. The process of deciding which of these sentences someone might receive was arbitrary. There was a rise of vagabondage throughout Europe, the causes of which are little understood. Public safety at this time was low and violent fights were common. This led to a desire among the public to see vengeance meted out through the legal system. “Society in general tolerated the open infliction of pain, especially on criminals.”¹⁹

It is in this context that penal substitution theory, with its heightened sensibilities of human tendency to wickedness, developed and led to policies of even harsher punishments. Calvin felt that any person who really looked at himself would know that God “is angry and at enmity with him.”²⁰ His theology is concerned with regaining God’s favor, which cannot be done without satisfaction. “The certainty here required is of no ordinary description—sinners, until freed from guilt, being always liable to the wrath and curse of God, who, as he is a just judge, cannot permit his law to be violated with impunity, but is armed for vengeance.”²¹

¹⁷ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 128.

¹⁸ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 128.

¹⁹ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 129.

²⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), vol. I, 464-67 (Bk. II, 16:1).

²¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. II. 16:1.

According to David Brown, there are many similarities between Calvin's views and those of Anselm.²² It is striking to see the many ways that Calvin took Anselm's atonement theory, which is based on Anselm's feudal worldview, and updated it for the legal world of the nation-state in which Calvin lived. Calvin even frequently uses the language of "satisfaction." Whereas Anselm's concern is the restoration of order, Calvin's concern is the vindication of the law, which stems from the righteousness of God's own being. Whereas Anselm's background is feudal law and the developing church system of penance, Calvin's background is that of a lawyer. Whereas sin for Anselm is the failure to render God his due, for Calvin, sin is defying the law, thus meriting eternal death. Whereas Anselm's solution is that Christ pays our debts, Calvin's solution is that he bears our punishment. For Anselm, Christ's offering of a perfect life is required to save God's people. For Calvin, divine wrath results from human sin, and only substitutionary and propitiatory suffering and death in the form of judicial punishment can solve the problem. Whereas Anselm portrayed God as a feudal king or lord, Calvin's theology describes God as an "absolute monarch," whose power had been theorized by Machiavelli.²³

While there are many similarities between penal substitution theory and Anselm's satisfaction theory, and, indeed, Calvin's theory is based on Anselm's, it is important to note that the two theories are not the same. Both Anselm and Calvin speak of the necessity of a "God-man" "to present our flesh as the price of satisfaction to God's righteous judgment."²⁴ A major difference between Calvin and Anselm's theology, though, is that Calvin prefers to talk of "heavenly decree" rather than "absolute necessity."

²² Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," 296.

²³ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 136.

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. II. 12:1-3.

Calvin agrees with Anselm that Christ's life of obedience is part of the price of satisfaction, but he shifts the main focus to Christ's death, "with its gruesome character stressed in a way that would have been quite foreign to Anselm."²⁵ For Anselm, it was enough that Christ had given up what he did not owe (his life), whereas for Calvin, the satisfaction borne is the punishment that might otherwise have been imposed on us. Unlike Anselm, for Calvin, "making up enough" cannot be compensatory but must be exactly in kind, punishment of death for punishment of death. This is particularly seen in how Calvin reinterprets Christ's descent into hell in the Apostles' Creed. The traditional interpretation is part of the Christus Victor view that there is a liberating effect to Christ's death such that those who died before him are now freed from hell. Calvin reinterprets "hell" in the Creed to be not a place for departed spirits but a hell of suffering that Christ had endured on humanity's behalf in order "to bear and suffer all the punishments they ought to have sustained."²⁶

The energy and force behind Calvin's theology is the conviction of guilt and the anxiety over certain punishment. Calvin would have argued that he began his theology with scripture, but, in fact, his theology is a penal version of Anselm's satisfaction atonement. As was shown in Chapter Three, satisfaction theory was developed not on scripture but the feudalism of Anselm's society.

Calvin does make a contribution to atonement theology in the idea of the three offices of Christ. Christ is prophet in that he is our teacher, and his Spirit continues this role throughout time in the church's preaching. This theme echoes the Suffering Servant tradition. Christ is king in his deliverance of the promise of eternal life. Christ is priest in that he makes the expiatory sacrifice. These last two themes echo the messiahship tradition. Unfortunately, though, these

²⁵ Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," 296.

²⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk II. 16.8-12.

scriptural themes remain tangential. Anselm’s satisfaction atonement theory—interpreted in a penal way—provides the foundation and force for Calvin’s theology.

In Calvin’s view, if Christ had died in any other way than he did, there would have been no satisfaction, “But when he is placed as a criminal at the bar, where witnesses are brought to give evidence against him, and the mouth of the judge condemns him to die, we see him sustaining the character of an offender and evil doer....Our acquittal is in this – that the guilt which made us liable to punishment was transferred to the head of the Son of God (Is 53:12).”²⁷ Here we see that Calvin makes the error, which I have thoroughly described and argued against in Chapters One and Two, of translating the Suffering Servant Poem in a way that takes sacrifice out of its cultic context in the Old Testament. Thus, in Calvin’s misappropriation of it, the Suffering Servant tradition loses its transformative power, which I have shown is nonviolent confrontation with violent oppression. Instead it simply becomes a device to support Calvin’s violent penal reinterpretation.

It is tragic that what will become the dominant atonement theology of the Western church through Calvin’s interpretation of Anselm is so discordant with the atonement theology of the New Testament and most probably Jesus himself.²⁸ Both penal substitution theory and the New Testament look to the Suffering Servant as a central metaphor. Jesus and the New Testament writers, though, carry forward the Suffering Servant tradition to show that Christ’s atonement is nonviolent and reconciling, yet penal substitution theory is violent and punitive. That development will have a dramatic and devastating effect on society’s approach to criminal justice that continues to this day.

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk II. 16.5.

²⁸ See Mark 10:35-45.

Brown, who argues in favor of Anselm's theory, shares the concern of many critics of penal substitution theory that its focus on punishment is problematic. Brown points out that, while Anselm and Calvin both share the concern for the seriousness of sin, the difference is that for Anselm, the remedy is the offering of a perfect life voluntarily given. For Calvin, the remedy is that the punishment of death is taken on behalf of those who deserve it. Thus, Brown agrees with the frequently made criticism of penal substitution theory that it is difficult to understand the justice of an innocent person taking the punishment for the guilty "in violation of any plausible theory of retributive justice...In speaking of crime rather than debt it is thus far from clear that Calvin has improved the argument."²⁹

Barth also points out the problem of penal substitution theory's interpretation of the cross. According to Barth, in Christ on the cross we see punishment for our sin. Yet the point is not that punishment is required of Christ or of us by God. The point is that we need to see ourselves as totally undeserving of God's love before change can begin to be effected in us.³⁰ Brown argues that there is an advantage in this interpretation of satisfaction theory against that of Calvin in that it offers an ethical dimension. According to Brown, this view does "not just look to the negative effects of sin but also directs attention to a particular style of living, one that continued the pattern of making amends."³¹ Yet, Brown is incorrect in his view that Barth's interpretation of the cross has an ethical component. Even if it is true that what Barth has proposed makes the individual aware of his sin and need of redemption, it does not follow that the sinner becomes aware of his need to incorporate into his life a "pattern of making amends." One could easily ask, "If Christ has made amends, why do I need to?" This is especially true if

²⁹ Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," 297.

³⁰ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (London: SCM Press, 1949), 101-07, 114-20.

³¹ Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," 298.

one adds to this theory the eschatological hope that Christ is coming back to make everything right.

The Rise of the Modern Prison System

The result of the development of penal substitution theory was that, “wherever Calvinism spread, punitive sentencing followed.”³² For more than a century sin and crime were considered to be identical. “The sinner-offender was a kind of Protestant Everyman, a living example of the potential for evil which lies in every heart and against which every soul must be vigilant.”³³ Calvin’s penal substitution theory had a brutal effect on society’s approach to criminal justice through the eighteenth century.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, though, a new humanitarian concern with regards to criminality began to flourish corresponding with a new interest in atonement theologies other than penal substitution theory. Atonement language pervaded politics, literature, and religion.³⁴ In both Britain and America the debate over slavery was raging. The century was characterized by higher religious guilt, which became a political and social motivator. The abolition of slavery came to be seen as the first instance of an act of atonement for national sins.³⁵

The nineteenth century was a time of much social change – population growth, middle class development, growth of slums, and great class divisions. Middle class people felt “both guilty and helpless before these social changes.”³⁶ In reaction to these many social changes,

³² Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 140.

³³ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 140.

³⁴ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 190.

³⁵ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 194.

³⁶ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 195.

some argued in favor of harsh punishments following the old model. Others, reflecting the new interest in societal atonement, believed that there was the possibility of healing criminality and class division.

Although Amsterdam began the modern regime of imprisonment in 1596,³⁷ prison sentences did not become the normal mode of punishment until the time between 1780 and 1810. Prior to that, prisons were only used to hold people awaiting trial. The rise of prisons was a dramatic shift from spectacles of torture. In 1780, half of people sentenced to death were hanged while the other half had their sentences commuted. By 1808, only ten percent of those sentenced to death were ultimately hanged.³⁸ Clearly, for the first time prison was seen by many magistrates as an alternative to capital punishment.

There is much debate as to what led to the shift from execution, torture, and mutilation to prisons. Some have argued that the move to prisons and away from spectacles of torture reflected the shift of power happening at the time. The focus shifted from the body to the soul, and power shifted from the executioner to technicians, such as chaplains, psychiatrists, and educationalists, who were able to exercise power through their knowledge. Others have argued that the rise of penitentiaries reflected a new means of exploiting cheap labor, and in this way it was part of the development of capitalism.³⁹

Some have been skeptical of the intentions of the reformers, instead arguing that what was being created was a disciplinary society particularly well suited to the emergence of an industrial society.⁴⁰ “The prison creates delinquents as its deskilling of inmates leads to

³⁷ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 129.

³⁸ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 166.

³⁹ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 167.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, tr. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

recidivism. The delinquent class is useful as a strategy of political domination, as it serves to divide the working class and reinforce respect for the law and for property.”⁴¹ Thus, the prison “does not control the criminal so much as control the working class by creating the criminal.”⁴²

Officially, at this time there was not much faith in the idea of reformation.⁴³ There was, though, a current of prison reform that sought to limit capital punishment and that argued that prisoners might be changed and ‘redeemed.’⁴⁴ Some prisons were conceived as places to make prisoners better people. “The comparison of the sinful soul to the prisoner, and of redemption to reform and release, was commonplace which looked back to St. Paul, and it was one of the most powerful rhetorics in the development of the penitentiary.”⁴⁵

According to one common perspective of the time, crime was like insanity that could be cured. In another school of thought, often espoused by clergy and theologians, sin and guilt needed “to be atoned for in ‘penitentiaries’ which took some, at least, of their ideas from monasticism.”⁴⁶ The idea that prevailed in British prisons for the entire nineteenth century was that absolute solitude would lead the prisoner to reflect on his sins, repent, and amend. With scripture, hymns, and prayers the prisoner was encouraged to meditate on Christ’s atoning

⁴¹ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 217. Surprisingly, Gorringer does not mention how the decline of the institution of slavery might have affected the rise of the modern regime of imprisonment that was happening at the same time. These two things happening simultaneously and in the same places surely could not have been coincidental. Even if they are coincidental, they must have had an impact on each other.

⁴² David Garland, *Punishment and Modern Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 150.

⁴³ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 164.

⁴⁴ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 165.

⁴⁵ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 165.

⁴⁶ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 166.

passion.⁴⁷ Hymns focused on “the transforming power of the cross in a rhetoric which sublimated latent class conflict.”⁴⁸ In the view of many Victorian reformers, imposing their own Protestant asceticism on prisoners would lead to the transformation of the prisoner.

Despite the new interest in penal reform, the old ideology of retribution was still dominant at this time. Although the rise of prisons led to fewer executions, many still argued for harsh sentences as a method of deterrence. Atonement theologies supported this logic by imagining God as the governor of the universe, which was thought to be analogous to a commonwealth. Sin became defined as the public injury to God and the universe. Following typical retributist thinking, this atonement theology argued that there must be expression of the abhorrence of the crime. Punishment showed the goodness and benevolence of the law, demonstrated the impartial justice of the governor, and exhibited the evil consequences of breaking the law.⁴⁹ According to this commonly held Victorian view, the death of Christ serves all ends of the law (justifies it) in that it “deters men from breaking the law and answers the end of punishment.”⁵⁰

Contemporary Approaches to Prison and Atonement

At the end of the nineteenth century together with a critique of laissez-faire economics, many theologians came out in favor of rehabilitation.⁵¹ This coincided with the rise of the welfare state. At this time there was growth of a more complex view of the human person partly based on new developments in psychology. “The prisoner was no longer a free moral agent to be

⁴⁷ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 166.

⁴⁸ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 167.

⁴⁹ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 199.

⁵⁰ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 200.

⁵¹ Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 225.

blamed for wrong choices, and able to choose whether or not to reform, but the damaged person, who needed the services of the educationalist and the psychiatrist.”⁵² In the early 1900’s there emerged a great deal of optimism in the possibility of rehabilitation. This was partly based on a new faith in the fields of psychiatry and social work.

This period of optimism was brief. Many factors led to the collapse of rehabilitationist ideas and the return to retributivism. Gorringer points to the failure of welfare programs, slum clearance, and full employment to significantly improve crime rates. This led to pessimism that in turn shaped policy. Critics from the left and the right also argued that “determinist accounts of the human personality implied the end of morality.”⁵³ In 1971 the American Quakers gave one of the most powerful critiques rehabilitativist ideas. Their publication, *Struggle for Justice*, argued that rehabilitationist practices represented an absolute disregard for the integrity of the individual.⁵⁴ R.D. Laing challenged definitions of normality and the right of the State to determine what is deviancy. Coming out of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement, Laing and others advocated for individual autonomy and freedom.⁵⁵

At the same time, on the right the “tough on crime” rhetoric and its political policies came to the fore. According to Gorringer, the right had never abandoned retributive thinking. During most of the twentieth century, though, it had not been in a position of power in order to implement its policies. Coming out of the tumultuous sixties and seventies and with the rise of

⁵² Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 225.

⁵³ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 228.

⁵⁴ American Friends Service Committee, *Struggle for Justice: A Report on Crime and Punishment in America* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1971).

⁵⁵ R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965); *The Politics of Experience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

figures like Reagan, Gingrich, and George W. Bush the idea that the criminal owes retributive suffering to the community began to again be expressed in policy.⁵⁶

The Effect of Penal Substitution on the American Prison System Today

Gorringe points out that the premise that penal practice reacts back on ways of thinking still holds true today. The books that currently fill bookstore shelves on substitutionary atonement theologies contain the same themes of retributive theory. “Implicitly or explicitly they appeal to the need for order, the sense of justice, the need to make sense of suffering, and the need to deal with guilt.”⁵⁷

I have shown that in the western world, penal substitution theory has provided critical support, if not justification, for retributive theory from the time of the Reformation. Strong evidence that this hypothesis is no less true today than it has ever been: In the western world the death penalty is practiced almost exclusively in the American South, where penal substitution theory is still quite popular. Other examples of retributivist policies that occur in the American South include mass incarceration, solitary confinement, and prisoner neglect and mistreatment. These forms of punishment occur in other parts of the United States and other western countries as well, but nowhere are they as extreme as they are in the South.⁵⁸ Just examining the death penalty, though, the United States is alone among western countries in continuing this practice. Within the United States, executions are carried out almost exclusively in the South.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance*, 229.

⁵⁷ Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance*, 231.

⁵⁸ *Human Rights Report* (Atlanta: Southern Center for Human Rights, 2016), Accessed March 22, 2016, <https://www.schr.org/files/post/2015%20Human%20Rights%20Report.pdf>

⁵⁹ *Death Sentences and Executions* (London: Amnesty International, 2015), Accessed March 21, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/0001/2015/en/>

It is surely no accident that these policies of retribution, especially the death penalty, so consistently occur within the “Bible Belt,” a region so named because it is characterized by its culture of conservative Evangelical Protestantism. Central to this expression of the Christianity is the penal substitution view of the atonement. The history of ways that racism has shaped public policy in the South from slavery, to Jim Crow, and criminal justice policy has been well documented and in recent years there has been renewed interest in this area of scholarship.⁶⁰ While racism has certainly shaped American criminal justice policy, it is also true that Penal substitution theory has worked together with racism to support retributivist punishment by giving it divine sanction.

The reason that penal substitution theory continues to reinforce policies of retribution is that, put simply, penal substitution theory implies that earthly retributive punishment is demanded because God demanded the death of his Son. This theology provides a theological underpinning not only for the cosmic order but for the social order as well. The concern of retributivist theory is “to appeal to an idea of balance which crime disturbs and which punishment restores.”⁶¹ Calvin’s argument postulates this same idea metaphysically. “It has to, because the earthly is, after all, an analogue to the heavenly.”⁶²

There are many reasons why penal substitution theory is such a powerful culture-shaping ideology, especially in the American South where it has been so prominently preached in Evangelical churches. For one, the language of honor is both the language of law and of religion. The strength of penal substitution theory is also in the way it answers key questions of retributive

⁶⁰ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

⁶¹ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 97.

⁶² Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 97.

theory: “If we ask why a person ought to be punished in the wake of wrongdoing, then an essential part of the answer is to rectify the damage done to the community.”⁶³ In both worldviews sin and crime destroy the harmony or balance of society. What, therefore, should be the response? We cannot turn a blind eye because wrongdoing alters our relationship with the offender. To behave as if nothing had been done wrong would be to deny the implications of his or her actions which have injured the social fabric of the community. Punishment is just and proper because it “restores that fair balance of benefits and burdens in society which crime disturbs; and it respects the criminal’s autonomy, since it accords with his own rational will.”⁶⁴ Similarly, in penal substitution theory, the sinner’s free will is preserved. Thus, secular and sociological philosophy of retribution is exactly what Calvin states metaphysically. It is no wonder, therefore, that penal substitution theology would have such an impact on the American criminal justice system, especially in the South.

Had the American South not been so influenced by penal substitution theory from the Reformation to the present day, it is not hard to imagine that the death penalty would have been abolished in America just as it has been throughout the rest of the western world. In the early nineteenth century, the crowds who came to see executions were ambivalent at best. A strong movement to abolish capital punishment grew up at the same time that the movement to abolish slavery developed. Both abolition efforts were based on similar philosophical and theological grounds.⁶⁵ Yet, while slavery would be abolished and eventually the death penalty would be

⁶³ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 99.

⁶⁴ Gorringer, *God’s Just Vengeance*, 103.

⁶⁵ For example, Cesare Beccaria's 1767 essay, “On Crimes and Punishment,” had an especially strong impact throughout the world, giving energy and authority to the death penalty abolition movement at the time. In this essay, Beccaria theorized that there was no justification for the state's taking of a life. See William A. Schabas, *The Abolition of the Death Penalty in International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997).

abolished in almost every developed country in the world, in the United States capital punishment still thrives.

As an ideology, penal substitution provides one of the subtlest and most profound justifications for capital punishment and retributive justice in general. Even today, when the flaws of penal substitution are becoming more commonly known, this theory is still a powerful force in shaping American culture. As a result, the preaching of the cross does not lead to the desire to confront violence, injustice, and oppression, as it should. Instead, it not only desensitizes us to judicial violence but even lends it sanction. Much like the Wesley brothers cited in the Introduction of this thesis, even in the face of increasing awareness of flaws in the death penalty system, such as racial and class bias in its application, many Christians are still untroubled by the death penalty precisely because of their theology of the cross. After all, such a Christian might say, if there was no death penalty, how could Jesus died on the cross for our sins?⁶⁶

In the following chapter, I will offer what I hope is a way out of the vicious cycle the church finds itself in of penal substitution theory reinforcing cultural concepts and practices of punishment and retribution and vice versa. This way out, I believe, is to be found in the transformative grace of narrative Christus Victor found in the church's practice of the sacraments.

⁶⁶ This very question was asked by one of the five-members of the Georgia Parole Board at one of their meetings in 2014. In Georgia, this board has the authority that most States grant to the governor to commute a person's death sentence in the run up to his execution. The question from the Parole Board member was posed to the pastor of a man condemned to die that evening. The pastor had been testifying about the inmate's character based on her many-years-long relationship with him since he had come to prison. The pastor was taken aback by the question since it had nothing to do with her testimony. I am unable to cite reporting of this story because these meetings are closed to reporters, but the pastor recounted the story to me at the vigil for the man who was executed that night. Based on many examples like this one, it is commonly believed by appeals attorneys and other advocates in Georgia that the members of the Parole Board use Evangelical theology, especially their theology of the cross, to keep them from being concerned with troubling questions. These questions include the execution of people who meet every standard of rehabilitation or who have strong claims of innocence, those who are mentally disabled and mentally ill, and those who have serious problems in their cases, such as overt racial and class bias.

Conclusion

Toward a Church that Embodies an Atonement Theology of Reconciliation in its Approach to Mass Incarceration and the Death Penalty

Until this chapter I have endeavored to show that the death penalty and the American prison system of which it is a part grew out of a retributive philosophy that has been intertwined with expressions of satisfaction atonement theology, especially Calvin's penal atonement theology. I have also tried to show that the family of satisfaction theories is fundamentally flawed as it is incompatible with scripture. I have tried to argue in favor of a narrative Christus Victor theory centered on the Suffering Servant and messiahship traditions found in the Old and New Testaments. To the extent that penal atonement theology has offered justification and even sanctification for retribution, the philosophy and practice of the prison system has been dependent upon this theology. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis, other studies have shown that the retributive approach of the prison system has led to many criminal justice and societal problems, such as the high recidivism rate and the high degree of poverty and societal violence compared to other western societies.¹

A new healthy approach to criminal justice that is restorative rather than retributive is urgently needed. In this concluding chapter my intention is not to offer proposals to "Christianize" the prison system. Amy Levad notes that such theology or ethics "that propose the

¹ Richard B. Freeman, "Crime and the Employment of Disadvantaged Youth," in *Urban Labor Markets and Job Opportunity*, ed. George Peterson and Wayne Vroman (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 1992); John Hagan and Ronit Dinovitzer, "Collateral Consequences of Imprisonment for Children, Communities, and Prisoners," in *Prisons*, ed. Tonry and Petersilia, 121-62; and Bruce Western, Becky Pettit, and Josh Guetzkow, "Black economic progress in the Era of Mass Imprisonment," in *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment*, ed. Marc Maurer and Meda Chesney-Lind (New York: New Press, 2002), 165-80. For illustrations of the American crisis of mass incarceration, see also Adam Liptak, "U.S. Prison Population Dwarfs That of Other Nations," *New York Times*, April 23, 2008; and Heather C. West, "Prison Inmates at Midyear 2009—Statistical Tables," Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/pim09st.pdf>.

‘Christianizing’ of society will rightfully face serious, valid, and important opposition.”²

However, as I have shown, the philosophy of the prison system has drawn its moral authority from a theology that purports to represent the wisdom of Christian scripture but in fact does not. Therefore, it is worth considering in this final chapter what wisdom narrative Christus Victor, a view that is quite compatible with scripture, might offer to prison philosophy and practice. Finally, my ultimate goal in this chapter is not to criticize failed criminal justice policies, which most people are only too aware of. My ultimate goal is to show that the church is to be the community of Christ’s atonement in response to the deep alienation and social sin that is the American prison system, especially the death penalty.

If the American prison system is an example of practices derived from penal substitution atonement theology, the liturgy and sacraments of the church offer examples of practices derived from the narrative Christus Victor theology of atonement that I have argued for in this thesis. These ancient practices of the Christian community offer a very different response to wrongdoing than the retributive practices of the American prison system. In this chapter I will conclude this thesis by arguing that these practices, particularly Baptism, Eucharist, and Reconciliation, offer principles for a healthy alternative to retributive criminal justice policies, especially the death penalty. Most importantly, I hope this chapter will point to the sacraments as offering Christians a clarifying vision of our reconciled/reconciling identity and practice and how that identity and practice impacts our response to the death penalty.

² Amy Leivad, *Redeeming a Prison Society: A Liturgical and Sacramental Response to Mass Incarceration* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2014), 83.

A Liturgical and Sacramental Approach to Justice

The sacraments show us the hidden reality of salvation in the world. They form us into people who “engage in the public service of consecrating the world in emulation of the servanthood of Jesus Christ.”³ In these practices we become the church, “the ekklesia, the scattered community of Christians across the world called together to witness to God’s reign in our midst, particularly by striving for justice for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized.”⁴ As we participate in the sacraments, “we are drawn into a public, political, and pluralistic tradition that is called toward justice emulating God’s reign for life in the community and in the world beyond.”⁵

Sacramentality is the idea that “everything is, in principle, capable of embodying and communicating the divine.”⁶ “The rehearsal of the vision of salvation and grace through the liturgy of the sacraments should help us to envision the world, our selves, and our neighbors as God does. In taking on this vision in our sacramental lives, we are formed to see and act in certain ways in our moral lives.”⁷

Sacraments reveal the coming Kingdom of God in its fullness. This Kingdom was inaugurated by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We know what characterizes this Kingdom from the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. One of the distinguishing markers of the Kingdom of God is justice. For Christians, “sacramentality, morality, and the pursuit of justice

³ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 108.

⁴ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 108.

⁵ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 109.

⁶ Richard McBrien, *Catholicism*, Study Edition (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1981), 731.

⁷ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 80.

are linked to each other.”⁸ In the sacramental life we see the in-breaking of God’s reign, and that calls us to seek justice.

According to Don E. Saliers, “when worship occurs, people are characterized, given their life and their fundamental location and orientation in the world.”⁹ “The public service of *leitourgia* can refer to the gathering of the church, of the *ekklesia*, in prayer (as opposed to private devotion), but it refers more basically to the service rendered by the *ekklesia* to others, especially the poor, oppressed, and marginalized.”¹⁰ Liturgy is the work of the church, “emulating the servanthood of Jesus Christ in anticipation of God’s full reign.”¹¹

An expansive view of liturgy and sacraments provides a framework for responding to injustice: “More than a rubric or a list, liturgy and sacraments comprise the work of the church in consecrating the world in emulation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, through the Holy Spirit by serving God and neighbors, particularly victims of injustice. Engaging in this work is the worship of God.”¹²

Liturgy and the sacraments embody narrative Christus Victor and create a community centered around the Servant Messiah. Thus, liturgy and the sacraments are political. They provide a foretaste of God’s reign. In this way they do not “draw us out of political and moral troubles, but more deeply into the world, presenting an alternate vision of who ultimately rules

⁸ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 80.

⁹ Don E. Saliers, “Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7, no. 2 (1979): 175.

¹⁰ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 86.

¹¹ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 86.

¹² Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 87.

over us all.”¹³ “Rather than otherworldly, apolitical, or privatized religious practices, the liturgy of the sacraments draws us more deeply into the world in anticipation of the ultimate mystery of God’s reign in which life, freedom, justice, love, and peace fully take hold in our existence.”¹⁴ The ritual lives of church communities ought to shape Christians toward the justice of God’s Kingdom. Liturgy and sacraments give us God’s vision for the world. They lead us to “appreciate the need of others in light of God’s grace. This vision alters us as God’s vision for the world becomes our own will.”¹⁵ The sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist, and Reconciliation are particularly important for how Christians enact justice in the world.

The Sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist and Reconciliation

The sacramental life begins with the sacrament of Baptism, a liturgy that expresses the atonement theology argued for in this thesis that is drawn from the Suffering Servant and messiahship traditions. The messiahship tradition is seen in such areas of the rite as when the candidate¹⁶ is asked, “Will you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?”¹⁷ Here the candidate renounces one king and by association his kingdom in favor of Jesus Christ, whom the candidate pledges to “follow and obey” as his “Lord.”¹⁸ The messiahship theme is continued in the Baptismal Covenant as the candidate recites the Apostles’ Creed with its Christus Victor themes of suffering “under Pontius Pilate,” descending into hell,

¹³ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 88.

¹⁴ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 5.

¹⁵ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 5.

¹⁶ When I mention “the candidate,” I also mean sponsors in the case of an infant.

¹⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 302.

¹⁸ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 302.

and on the third day rising again. Also in the Baptismal Covenant we see the Suffering Servant tradition as a dominant theme as the candidate pledges to “respect the dignity of every human being.”

Every Baptism is about new life and celebration, but it is also about “a death in the family.”¹⁹ As a real joining with Christ’s life, it is a real joining with his death and therefore his resurrection. In Christian belief, Baptism is necessary because we are sinners living in a broken and distorted world. Baptism liberates us from the powers of violence and death. It is a break with the world and reconciliation with God.

According to Paul in Romans, in Baptism we are crucified with Christ that the body of sin might be destroyed.²⁰ For Paul, “sin is not so much about the choices we make to do this or not to do that, but about an even more basic loss of freedom and power to make good choices at all. Sin is the loss of freedom and power to become who we were meant to be.”²¹ Sin is in cultural values that form and shape us. Sin is in the way those values are promoted through the politics of self-interest and domination, engaging in pretense, and self-deception.

Sin is especially in the standard that American society uses to define humanness: white maleness.²² How close a person is to that standard determines, “how he will be treated, what expectations we have for him, and how he will relate to other people.”²³ These definitions and a

¹⁹ Stanley Saunders, “A Death in the Family,” *The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers 2006), 41.

²⁰ Romans 6:6.

²¹ Saunders, “A Death in the Family,” 43.

²² Saunders, “A Death in the Family,” 43.

²³ Saunders, “A Death in the Family,” 44.

person's participation in them determine, in many ways, what a person's life means and what his options are.

Baptism represents the dying to these values and to this politics and “the complete obliteration of this reality and these marks of identity.”²⁴ They are replaced with a new identity in Christ. The death that one experiences in Baptism means ceasing to exist under the powers of this world. “Baptism is a training in dying—dying especially to sin and the old self—so that new life can come into being.”²⁵ The death of Baptism means being transformed and transferred to a completely new and different kind of existence with different powers and possibilities and new eyes to see the world. It means a new family and a new Lord.

The New Testament shows great consequences for those who are called to give up their lives and follow Jesus.²⁶ Jesus tells his potential followers of the danger that they risk.²⁷ Jesus' followers can expect to encounter the ridicule that he did.²⁸ The New Testament shows that Baptism makes the person out of sync in many ways with the rest of society. The person baptized has different ways of making meaning, different ways of relating, and different values. The person Baptized must struggle to find ways of forming identity not tied up in white maleness. This makes relationships with a diversity of people more complex. It means trying to get along with others by not turning to domination and intimidation and violence. It will make one more vulnerable. As one who follows the Servant Messiah, it means risking suffering because of not learning to use violence to defend oneself.

²⁴ Saunders, “A Death in the Family,” 44.

²⁵ Saunders, “A Death in the Family,” 42.

²⁶ Matthew 4:19.

²⁷ Matthew 10.

²⁸ Called Beelzebub, for example: Matthew 12:24.

From all of this, it is easy to see how the sacrament of Baptism embodies the messiahship and Suffering Servant traditions of narrative Christus Victor. As in the messiahship tradition, Baptism is the doorway into a new social order, in which “all prior stories and social arrangements are null and void.”²⁹ As in the Suffering Servant tradition, that new social order has values of sacrificial service which translate into being a part of relationships characterized by “sharing, gratitude, and dependence on God, rather than exploitation and self-interest.”³⁰ It is a social order most clearly described by Paul in Galatians 3:28 when he states that as many of us as have been baptized into Christ have clothed ourselves with Christ: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of us are one in Christ Jesus.”

Fundamentally, Baptism means the commitment to discipleship in community. It powerfully asserts that the Christian can only learn from the Servant Christ in the community where he is found. There we learn to “respect the dignity of every human being.” There we learn to live for others in the name of Christ even if that means suffering. There we learn mercy and forgiveness in the midst of conflict and suffering. Baptism also has profound implications for the Christian approach to criminal justice, since inherent to the sacrament is a learning to die to the values of the wider culture, particularly the white maleness standard of humanness. This also means being reoriented toward new values of humanness shaped by participation in the community. Based on Jesus’ life and ministry, those values surely must include solidarity with the death row inmate. Thus, Baptism means a completely different approach to prisons for the church than that of the wider culture.

²⁹ Saunders, “A Death in the Family,” 45.

³⁰ Saunders, “A Death in the Family,” 45.

Eucharist

The Eucharist is food to sustain the Baptized in their new identity in Christ and in living out the values of his community. Like the sacrament of Baptism, the Eucharist enacts Christian atonement rooted in the Suffering Servant tradition's emphasis on nonviolent sacrificial love and the messiahship tradition's emphasis in membership in the Kingdom of God, with Christ as the head of that society. The Eucharist is a foretaste of the Kingdom of God in that it overcomes sin, suffering, death, and injustice. As such, it embodies the themes of the Suffering Servant and messiahship traditions, and therefore, it is an essential practice of Christian atonement. The "source and summit"³¹ of our moral lives as Christians, the Eucharist reorients the participant toward right relationship with God and neighbor. For a focus on prison ministry, there is a particularity in this sacrament toward reconciliation with one's neighbor who is in prison because we recall Jesus' execution as a convicted criminal. This remembrance is "emblematic of his ministry to the most despised and degraded in his midst...In this sacrament, we are reoriented toward justice in God's reign as we confront ongoing injustices in our world."³² In the Eucharist, we find two visions. The first is the upper room of Maundy Thursday with its table fellowship and foot washing, which is a vision of the community that God calls us to. It is this vision that triumphs in the Resurrection. The second is the imprisonment, torture, and execution of Good Friday, which is a vision of the type of community that God condemns.

The Eucharist is at the center of the Christian sacramental and liturgical life, and therefore it is at the center of Christian moral practice. The New Testament description of the institution of this sacrament shows the connection between Eucharist and justice. The Last

³¹ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Paragraphs 10 and 14. See Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, vol. 1 (Northport, NY: Costello, 1998).

³² Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 6-7.

Supper fulfills the covenant established with Israel for the reconciliation of all creation with God. In recalling the covenant established with Israel, the Eucharist provides a foretaste of the reign of God in its fullness.

The Eucharistic meal also brings to mind numerous other meals described in the Gospels in which Jesus ate with prostitutes and tax collectors. “He included at his table people who were excluded by society and whom he would welcome in God’s kingdom.”³³ In Luke 22:24-30, Jesus links receiving the kingdom to standing with him in his trials and with becoming servants of others. The Gospel accounts of the last supper and other meals with Jesus emphasize “the moral importance of covenantal relationships as the mark of the life of the Christian community and ultimately in God’s reign...They also uphold visions of inclusiveness and servanthood as markers of the morality of these relationships.”³⁴

The Eucharist is a practice that calls the Christian community to a particular ethical response because it endeavors to “do this in remembrance” of Christ. For the first Christians, the ethical call of the Eucharist meant living together, sharing belongings in common, and giving all their possessions to those in need. In the New Testament, the Eucharistic meal is understood to be an experience of the risen Messiah. That experience in the breaking of bread led the first Christians to a distinct way of life: public service to others, especially the poor. Early Christians understood the Eucharist to be sharing in the body of Christ and therefore one body with one another.³⁵

³³ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 94.

³⁴ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 95.

³⁵ 1 Corinthians 10:16-17.

The New Testament descriptions of the Eucharist show many themes that are relevant to the moral formation of Christians. “Eucharistic celebration occurs within the context of a covenant that binds God to human beings and upholds the importance of maintaining relationship for the well-being of humanity.”³⁶ The Eucharistic table is inherently inclusive, which means inclusiveness of the covenant and ultimately of God’s reign. “The demands placed upon participants in the meal are not only spiritual and otherworldly. Rather, participation in the Eucharist requires moral transformation as we become servants of others, especially to those who are in need and excluded from relationship.”³⁷ Without this transformation we defile the Eucharist. In short, the Eucharist creates a new community that seeks reconciliation among its members and with the wider world.

All of this clearly shows that the Eucharist is the Christian Community’s liturgical witness of the atonement theology argued for in this thesis. The New Testament accounts of the Last Supper and early celebrations of the Eucharist show an emphasis on Christus Victor – remembering the Servant Messiah’s victory over the powers and principalities of this world through his life, death, and resurrection. The practice in response to this belief involves breaking bread, coming together as community, sacrificially reaching out to those excluded. “The inclusiveness and servanthood upheld within the covenantal relationships of the church stand in contrast to the standards of justice in the wider world, especially among the privileged and powerful.”³⁸

³⁶ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 95.

³⁷ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 95.

³⁸ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 96.

The atonement theology of the Eucharist is not focused only on Jesus' death. We remember his *life, death, and resurrection* and anticipate the coming reign of God in the *future*. The experience of the past, present, and future simultaneously gives the believer a taste of atonement in the experience of the kingdom and the life of sacrificial service. This experience of the "already by not yet" produces a longing for the "not yet." "Through participation in the Eucharist, Christians glimpse God's reign in which life overcomes death, peace conquers violence, sin is forgiven, all creation is reconciled, the covenant is fulfilled, and God's love and justice reign."³⁹

The hope of the Eucharist is in both the elements of the bread and the wine and in the community gathered around the table. This is not an otherworldly hope but a bodily, communal and political hope. It is a hope that draws Christians into confrontation with injustice. The Eucharist offers a vision of justice based on Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It is a justice that is often out of sync with the justice of the world. The Eucharist gives us a new set of values – those of Jesus in which those who society says are least valuable become the most valued. "As we celebrate this sacrament, we remember and protest the death of Jesus *as a convicted criminal* at the hands of the Roman Empire."⁴⁰

According to Paul, Eucharistic practice calls the church to discern the body of Christ, to recognize the sources of brokenness, exclusion, and division amongst us and to work toward redemption, healing and inclusion. When we fail to do so, we eat and drink judgment against ourselves, as we "walk in the ways of the principalities and powers of this world."⁴¹ The

³⁹ Leivad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 96.

⁴⁰ Leivad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 97.

⁴¹ Leivad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 97-98.

Eucharist gives us a vision of God’s reign to work toward, leads us to recognize that those who commit crime are not the only people in need of social reintegration, repentance, and reform:

“The eschatological imagination of the Eucharist, which makes known both the brokenness and redemption of the world, ought to create a yearning to confront the alienation that degrades and demeans...”⁴²

Susan Ross puts it this way: “The Eucharist is about something much larger—human reconciliation with God and with each other. Participation in the Eucharist ought always to push one ‘outward’ so that liturgical expressions can—as much as possible, in their limited and imperfect context—approximate an expression of that eschatological vision.”⁴³ The Eucharist is food for living in the Kingdom in the “already” sense and pursuing the kingdom in the “not yet” sense. The Eucharist is also the Kingdom itself. It works toward it. It is an act that is threatening to the powers and principalities in and of itself.

The Eucharist, which includes sharing food and drink from the snack machines during a death row visitation, is nothing less than the sacramentality of joining with God’s work in the world, where God is undermining structures of injustice and replacing them with the Kingdom of God.⁴⁴ In writing about his experience of the homeless sharing coffee and doughnuts with him on the streets of Atlanta, Charles Campbell describes it this way:

In such table fellowship Jesus is present, breaking down barriers between people and bringing about reconciliation. At such meals our oppressive social order, reinforced in everyday table practices, is undermined, and the reign of God breaks into the world. When we practice Jesus’ peculiar “table manners,” our activity coincides with God’s activity in the world—and that is sacramental. Coffee and doughnuts shared with

⁴² Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 98.

⁴³ Susan Ross, “Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7, no. 2 (1979): 264.

⁴⁴ John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Nashville, Discipleship Resources 1992) pp.1, 71-73.

homeless people embody the kind of communion Jesus desires. “Do *this* in remembrance of me.”⁴⁵

There may not be much else that a Christian has the power to do in the face of injustice, such as mass incarceration and the death penalty, other than to make Eucharist in the form of presence with prisoners in the name of Christ.⁴⁶ Yet, as little a response to such a grave injustice as this may seem, the Eucharist is enough because in this sacrament is the “already” in which the “not yet” is becoming true.

Reconciliation

As Baptism provides the foundation for the Eucharist, these two sacraments provide the foundation for the Christian practices of confession and forgiveness. In sacramental traditions, the liturgical practice of confession and forgiveness is sometimes called Reconciliation. This sacrament also provides a model for responses to individual wrongdoing, and thus, resources for examining criminal justice. Christian “responses to wrongdoing occur in a Eucharistic context in which we remember the reconciling work of Christ on the cross through the bread and the wine and so participate in the body of Christ as the church.”⁴⁷

In the sacrament of Reconciliation, the emphasis is not only on individual sins but also broken communal relationships: “In particular, everyone is complicit in social sin that creates the broader context for individual wrongdoing and that fosters injustices that undergird poverty,

⁴⁵ Charles L. Campbell, “Coffee Doughnuts and Communion”, *The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers 2006), 40.

⁴⁶ Hopefully with the elements approaching bread and wine, but these are not necessary if they are denied. The Word, The Bread of Life, Christ, is present when two or three are gathered in his name: Matthew 18:20.

⁴⁷ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 102.

marginalization, and oppression.”⁴⁸ Thus, Reconciliation addresses two problems, individual sin and participation in and responsibility for social injustice.

Reconciliation is not “a legalistic rendering of a list of one’s sins in order to restore one’s ultimate place in heaven.”⁴⁹ Rather, it is a sacramental practice of accepting God’s grace and thereby returning to right relationship with God and neighbor. In this way the wrongdoer is restored to the wholeness in full communion with the body of Christ.

We see the origins of Reconciliation in Matthew 18:15-35. In this passage, Jesus outlines with specific steps a process for confronting a person who sins. We can draw from this description that limitless forgiveness is the guiding principle: Forgive not seven times, but seventy seven.⁵⁰

We also see early church practices of Reconciliation in Paul’s writings. Here, participation in the Eucharist clearly requires reconciliation among individuals and the community so that the church may fully exemplify the body of Christ.⁵¹ It should be noted that Paul endorses the expulsion of a man engaged in sexual immorality (living with his stepmother).⁵² Here, Paul is concerned that along with forgiveness there is a need for discipline for the building up of the community. For Paul, the Church is the reconciled community that seeks to deepen that reconciliation. The church must do the work of reconciliation based on Christ’s own work of reconciliation: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through

⁴⁸ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 80.

⁴⁹ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 90.

⁵⁰ Matthew 18:22.

⁵¹ 1 Corinthians 5:7-8.

⁵² 1 Corinthians 5:8.

Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”⁵³ Although Paul emphasizes the need for discipline, for him, judgment and discipline does not extend indefinitely. Forgiveness arises eventually in a reconciled and reconciling church.

In these foundational texts for Reconciliation Jesus and Paul give some important insights on responding to wrongdoing. First, the response to wrongdoing always happens in a communal context. We are accountable to the community. The community must be disciplined, “which requires judgment about what benefits or harms the community and its members.”⁵⁴ Punishment may be necessary, but, as discussed in Chapter Four’s section on Aquinas, it is directed to the ultimate good of the offender and the common good of the community. It is never seen as making satisfaction for wrongdoing. The community must prefer forgiveness and reconciliation as the ultimate outcome. This is based on the forgiveness already offered by God. Failure to do so harms the body of Christ.

Although the practices of Reconciliation that developed in the church have not always been healthy, such as when they have involved shaming and exclusion, the sacrament still has much wisdom for understanding how to respond to people who cause harm in our communities. First, the sacrament is closely linked with Baptism and the Eucharist, providing continuity with the spiritual and moral life of the church. Second, Reconciliation provides powerful rituals signaling exile and return of the sinner to the community. Third, ideally these rituals express solidarity of the church in sinfulness, reducing the isolation and stigmatization of penitents. Speaking about the Patristic period on this point, Levad points out, “the church was united in

⁵³ 2 Corinthians 2:7.

⁵⁴ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 102.

sinfulness, but also in the work of redemption.”⁵⁵ During this period, the community remained involved in the life of the sinner through prayer and guidance. There was a common responsibility for reconciliation and the transformation of sinful lives.

From the perspective and logic of satisfaction theories, particularly penal substitution, the status of the wrongdoer is one who is condemned. He is viewed as exiled and not even fully a child of God until satisfaction, usually in the form of punishment, is made to restore the individual to right relationship with God and the community. Therefore, those formed by satisfaction theories of the atonement often have no problem with the death penalty because in this practice satisfaction is being made for the executed person’s sin. While the execution is not viewed as saving the person—only repentance and acceptance of Christ as Lord and Savior can do that—there is the view that the punishment of execution provides the appropriate balance, as Anselm would say, to the crime it is meted out for. Historically, it is a similar idea to the punishment given as penance by confessors in order that the penitent may be restored to right relationship with God and the church.

Since Vatican II, there has been a reclaiming of the idea that fundamental to the practice of Reconciliation is the understanding that sin is less the violation of the law and more the wounding of covenantal relationships, in a covenantal setting. According to this understanding, the law is not an end in itself but “a tool that serves the end of right relationship.”⁵⁶ Therefore, the practice should not aim to mete out penalties for satisfaction but it should aim for the reconversion of the sinner “through moral and spiritual formation in a communal context.”⁵⁷ The move away from meting out “penalties for satisfaction” is clearly a move away from basing this

⁵⁵ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 104.

⁵⁶ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 105.

⁵⁷ Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society*, 105.

rite upon the fundamentally flawed satisfaction theories of atonement and toward a scripturally-based atonement theology rooted in the covenantal relationships of the Baptismal/Eucharistic community.

Recognizing that this sacrament is rooted in narrative Christus Victor rather than satisfaction theories of the atonement gives us a radically different vision of a Christian response to wrongdoing and to wrongdoers. For example, this sacrament and its history teach us that it is best not to understand individual wrongdoing in legalistic terms. Sin is not violation of the law but violation of relationships, which as I argued in the section on Baptism, is primarily found in choosing identities and values that are not shaped by Christ and his community, such as the white maleness standard of humanness. Reconciliation leads to an effort to transform those relationships and the character of the penitent. When this sacrament is based on satisfaction atonement theories, it seeks to satisfy the god of the law, which does nothing to transform relationships or character within community.

In stark contrast to the view that the wrongdoer is condemned and outside of the community, the practice of Reconciliation based on narrative Christus Victor theory teaches that wrongdoers are part of the community, even when excluded temporarily. According to this point of view, they must be given the capacity to turn themselves toward the good in response to God's grace. Applying this principle to the criminal justice system would immediately eliminate the practice of capital punishment since, while death as punishment may "satisfy" a legal requirement of punishment, it removes any opportunity for repentance and reconciliation. Reconciliation also teaches that one never becomes an object to be controlled, and one is always viewed as part of the human family. The communal understanding of solidarity of sinfulness allows the community to not view the sinner as other. The wrongdoer always has responsibility

and agency to reform her life and seek to make amends. Thus the wrongdoer is never viewed as ontologically flawed. Rather, she is always viewed as a child of God returning to the Father's house, a house of reconciled sinners.

Reconciliation teaches that sin harms the community and requires a communal response. Therefore, the wrongdoer is accountable not to an abstract legal principle but to the community. Accountability requires working to correct the harm that has been done. It is understood that punishment in and of itself is not valuable because it does not correct harm that has been done. Reconciliation requires that the members of the community provide guidance and relationship in order to restore the wrongdoer to full communion. If punishment is necessary, its purpose is not to inflict pain or make satisfaction, but only to serve the above purposes. Sometimes separation from the community is necessary for the protection of the community, but the ultimate goal is always reintroduction into the community. Thus, although judgement and discipline are required, forgiveness is the rule because of the community's solidarity in sinfulness and recognition of God's generosity in Christ. The Christian community understands that their work of reconciliation is not done through its own power. Empowered by God for a life of forgiveness, the community follows God's lead and thus becomes the reconciling community. In this way, the church becomes no less than the embodiment of its atonement theology: "Church...must be the reconciliation, the welcome home of the Father expressed by the family of God, which makes the repentance and conversion possible."⁵⁸

Conclusion

All atonement theology is a powerful character-shaping and culture-shaping force because in so many areas it is true to human experience. The need to atone for wrongdoing,

⁵⁸ Monika K. Hellwig, *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion: The Sacrament of Penance for Our Times* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1984), 24.

especially, is one of the most powerful human impulses for both individuals and communities. Moreover, the need to deal with the problem of violence is universal. In light of this problem, there is the need for practices derived from narrative Christus Victor embodied in the sacraments to help communities live together.

As I have shown, penal substitution theory is so powerful simply because the image it focuses on, the cross, targets both guilt and violence. In this theory, this one symbol holds so much meaning, offering a solution to the problems of guilt and violence. Using the scapegoat mechanism, it both bears the guilt and it redirects violence away from God's people. In this way, penal substitution theory addresses the need for order in society and in the human soul. It addresses the need for justice and the need to express moral outrage. It gives voice to the experience that suffering might sometimes be redemptive. Above all, penal substitution theory is a means of dealing with guilt and shame. Yet, as I have shown, it is a deeply flawed theory and because of that its empty atonement only offers false promises. Rather than delivering reconciliation, its violent and punitive character only deepens personal and social alienation.

The atonement theology that is needed to address these spiritual issues is the reconciling, nonviolent, and restorative view found in scripture and some early strands of Christian tradition. It is the narrative Christus Victor approach that I have endeavored to articulate in this thesis. It is the ancient practices of theology that are enacted in the sacraments that shape the church into the reconciling community of the Servant Messiah.

My hope and prayer is that American Christians will become clearly and intentionally committed to this vision of narrative Christus Victor given to us by God in the continual practice of sacraments. At the same time I hope and pray that we will be just as clear and intentional in our rejection of penal substitution theory and the policies of retribution, such as the death

penalty, that are based upon it. I believe that this will lead the Christian Community to be the atoning community it is called to be. To the extent that this thesis has helped in a small way to clarify that vision, I will consider it a success.