



# ATONEMENT THEORIES

*A Way through  
the Maze*

BEN PUGH

# ATONEMENT THEORIES

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# ATONEMENT THEORIES

*A Way through the Maze*

Ben Pugh



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*To Barry Taylor, the very first person to introduce me  
to what has proven to be the richest seam in theology:  
Atonement theories.*



# Contents

*Acknowledgments*      ix

*Introduction*      xi

## **PART ONE: *Christus Victor***

- 1    The Ransom to Satan    3
- 2    Recapitulation and *Theosis*    26

## **PART TWO: *Objective Theories***

- 3    Satisfaction Guaranteed: Anselm    45
- 4    Luther and Calvin    63
- 5    The Nineteenth Century    83
- 6    Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Developments    93

## **PART THREE: *Subjective Theories***

- 7    The Cross as Transformative Revelation    125
- 8    “The Spirit Comes from the Cross”: The Pneumatological  
    Synthesis    144

## **PART FOUR: *A New Option? Anthropological Theories***

- 9    The Story of Nonviolent Atonement    153
- 10    The Way through the Maze: Some Initial Deductions    162
- Conclusion    165
- Bibliography*    167





# Acknowledgments

WERE IT NOT FOR MATTERSEY Hall, I would never have had the chance to write an entire MA module called “Contemporary Issues in Atonement Theology,” which I delivered over a memorable week in January 2012. The students who gathered there, in the conservatory sitting around on the sofas, to discuss atonement theology for several hours every day were a delight. That module grew into this book. I am indebted to Dr. Ben Fulford of Chester University for creating the opportunity to try out parts of the book as papers presented at conferences there in October 2012 and January 2013. I am also very indebted to Dr. Stephen Skuce, Academic Dean of Cliff College (my boss), for allowing me to work away from the office throughout the July and August of 2013, which is when most of the book was written. Thanks to him I don’t need to include that “thanks for letting me neglect you all” bit, where the author thanks his or her long-suffering spouse and children for tolerating long periods of absence. I have enjoyed the company of my wife Pearl and my children Abigail, Gracie, and Reuben as much as always over this time. Finally, a word of thanks to my editor, Dr. Robin Parry: an extremely easy-going and supportive editor while I struggled to finish the manuscript.



# Introduction

IF YOU ARE A BEGINNING student doing a degree in theology or religious studies and you want a fairly friendly guide that will get you from knowing almost nothing, because the lecturer sent you to sleep that day, to gaining a pretty good level of mastery of the subject over the space of a few hours of reading, this book is for you. If that is you then you will probably need to ignore the footnotes and just keep reading. I have tried to make this like one of those encyclopedias full of lovely pictures that make you feel that you have the complete subject in your hands. Good encyclopedias make you feel really clever when you put them down because each article sums up, in an accessible way, the very latest research that is normally accessible only to the experts. Yet, you have grasped it. This is an encyclopedia of the atonement. It does not contain references to everything that has ever been said on the subject within theology, but it covers everything you really need to know, and does so exhaustively, yet simply. It is a compendium on the subject. You are not likely to be caught out on anything you should know if you have read this.

If you are not a beginning undergraduate student but are a postgraduate student or a beginning researcher of any kind, this book is for you. The only difference is that you do need to read the footnotes—and the bibliography. The footnotes have been designed to give you access to the very latest research in as exhaustive a way possible. And, if this book goes into further revisions, I fully intend to keep adding to that. For you, this book is a repository, a bibliographical resource.

It will also stimulate your thinking. Each major topic finishes with some pointers as to how the subject might be made to interact with contemporary culture or some other current issue in church life. This I hope will help you as your research idea starts to take shape. These concluding sections are signposts to further research rather than items of research in their own right.

## Introduction

Lastly (but not at all least), if you are not in academia but in ministry, and you have heard here and there that the atonement has suddenly—and perhaps for reasons that don't seem clear—become an issue of great controversy, this is for you. This book only very tentatively sketches out what my own conclusions are with regards to what is of merit in atonement theology and what is of rather less merit. Most books on the atonement that are coming out at the moment (thick and fast) are part of the controversy. They are polemical. This book tries to generate light rather than heat. It will equip you for debate and for the pulpit. It will not undermine your faith, it will strengthen it. You will be fed by reading the great thoughts of some great thinkers presented here. If you are in ministry then theology is all for you. We do what we do for you. The Christian academy itself is for your benefit and the benefit of your people. So read and be encouraged.

Now, for the parameters. With such a vast subject stretching out before us it seems especially important for me to point out what this book will not be. It will not, first of all, be a biblical survey of atonement theology. There are biblical metaphors of atonement and there are theological theories of atonement. This book deals with the latter. There are biblical authors who each show a particular emphasis in their treatment of the atonement and there are historical theologians who each had something valuable to say in their time. This book deals with the latter. It will exegete their writings using all the skills of a New Testament critic anxious that an author far removed from us in time and space be allowed to speak on their own terms to our situation. Where I do handle Scripture, it is through the lens of these historical theologians and their writings. In almost every case, I am looking at the way a theologian uses a biblical text, rather than analyzing it myself. For this reason, authors such as Frances Young, Martin Hengel, and John Vincent Taylor, who have all done some superb work on the atonement in Scripture, get barely a mention here. I do, however, harbor a strong ambition to eventually follow this book with one that will attempt a biblical theology of atonement. It is then that I will engage with those authors.

The second thing this book is not is that it is not a history of the doctrine of the atonement, but a history of *theories* of the atonement. Nevertheless, I hope it will be a useful update on the standard histories of the doctrine. It differs from them in that it does not survey all the theologians for what they say about the cross. Instead, it focuses on those theologians (and pastors) that have originated a theory of the atonement. Somebody once said that there are springs and there are lakes. Some theologians

merely collect water—they are the lakes. Others have that spark of originality, that creative something or other that makes them innovators of new forms of theology—they are springs, and it is springs we are mostly looking at there. Lakes are important too, of course, for the way they make use of what the springs have generated, and these are certainly not ignored. Take Thomas Aquinas for instance. He is certainly a monumental theologian but, when it comes to atonement theory, he is a lake. Whereas John McLeod Campbell, though a much lesser light than Thomas when it comes to the atonement, he's a bit of a genius—and so was Irenaeus, Anselm, Abelard, Luther, Calvin, Grotius, Girard, and so on. What about Augustine? Same again: a giant, probably an even bigger one than Thomas, but not when it came to atonement theology. Now I know the dividing line is difficult, since to a large extent they are all lakes: they are all relying on what has gone before and adapting it. However, in some cases this adaptation led to the creation of a recognized new theory of the atonement, a new species (a newt from a fish); in other cases it only resulted in a new breed (a fancy koi from a dull carp).

So, if you are beginning theology or religious studies, or you are a postgraduate researcher, or you are in ministry, this is for you. May God's Spirit use it to help you in your task.

New Year's Day  
2014



## PART ONE

# *Christus Victor*

THE FATHERS, FROM ORIGEN ONWARDS, are known for their crude metaphors of fish-hooks and bait and their ideas about the devil having legal rights and being cheated by God and humankind being ransomed from the devil by the giving of Christ's life. Hand-in-hand with the ransom-to-Satan theory went the recapitulation theory. Briefly, this was the idea that Christ was the Second Adam, the new Head of humanity. He retraced the steps of Adam, successfully resisting sin and evil in all the ways that Adam failed to, culminating in the ultimate act of obedience: death on a cross. These ways of looking at the cross then fell out of vogue as Anselm's satisfaction theory, and various responses to it, took center stage from the medieval period onwards. But in the 1930s, the Swedish theologian Gustav Aulén became enthralled with a view of Christ triumphant over demonic principalities and powers. Ever since his time, we call these patristic ideas the *Christus Victor* way of seeing the cross. More recently still, the ransom-to-Satan theory has been re-appropriated in differing ways in Word of Faith theology, in feminist theology, and by the emerging church movement. All these new developments are quite surprising and rather fascinating.

The main appeal of this *Christus Victor* view of Christ triumphant at the cross seems to be the motif of resisting evil, and in particular, the fact that Christ did so in a nonviolent way, not answering violence with violence, but rather disabling it with loving obedience. We have here the picture of a hero who has powerfully overcome humankind's worst enemies in the best possible way, and bids us all share in the spoils of his victory.



The ransom-to-Satan theory and the recapitulation theory also carry the kudos that comes from being the first ever reasonably well-developed theories of the atonement. This is massively appealing to those who point to the pre-Constantinian church—the church before Christendom—as the place where we should be learning all the lessons we will need as we try to adapt to post-Christendom. In these new contexts the classic ransom-to-Satan idea is never appropriated wholesale, and neither is the recapitulation idea, but in each case these adaptations seem to be all about a desire to move away from passive, defeatist, or austere ways of being human in favor of something more muscular and less individualistic.

This first chapter will look at the ransom-to-Satan theory specifically. It will examine the context in which the ransom-to-Satan theory first arose, and seek to determine why our contemporary context seems once again to be such a ready receptacle for it.

# The Ransom to Satan

## Origins 1: The Context

THE RANSOM-TO-SATAN THEORY AROSE FROM a profound awareness of evil. Not only were Christians, until 313 CE,<sup>1</sup> being systematically persecuted but, as McDonald observes:

The condition of the Gentile world made such notions as bondage and release, captivity and ransom, more tragically familiar. . . . Everywhere economic terror and spiritual fear reigned and intertwined to make human life doubly miserable. Many were enduring bondage and slavery physically, but all were caught up in them spiritually.<sup>2</sup>

So conscious were the early Christians of the pervasiveness of Satanically inspired evil (see the book of Revelation) that they developed strong dualistic tendencies: God on one side, the devil on the other, and no neutral ground in between. This dualism in turn was fed by the now-thriving gnostic theories that were proving so popular as to almost swamp

1. This was the date of the so-called “Edict of Milan,” which, among other things, secured a benevolent attitude towards Christians throughout the two halves of the Roman Empire (West and East).

2. McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ*, 138. Specifically, he cites “marauding gangs” who roamed about “capturing travelers and demanding payment for their release.” McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ*, 139.

the church.<sup>3</sup> Gnosticism is described aptly by Franks as “like the cuckoo in the sparrow’s nest.”<sup>4</sup>

Gnosticism, a sprawling aggregate of somewhat extravagant beliefs, is divided into certain distinct groups. Grensted<sup>5</sup> claims two types—Valentinian and Marcionite—as the true source of the ransom-to-Satan theory. These types of Gnosticism tended to teach something like this: humankind is under the Demiurge. Some humans have the spark of a heavenly nature, and the goal is to free this spiritual inner self by means of enlightenment (gnosis). The inner self must be released from its bondage to matter. How? The revelation of the Logos from the heavenly world. The Logos, an important Greek philosophical idea, was the very mind of the supreme God, spoken out into the world. He alone could grant enlightenment to truly spiritual people and free them from their false attachment to all things material. But, even those who come from the heavenly world, such as the Logos, must not ignore the power of the Demiurge. The Demiurge was the evil demi-god that created this stultifying, unspiritual thing called matter in the first place. Further solution: the Logos must conform outwardly to material conditions. He must not reveal who he really is—like a king in disguise. Thus, the Demiurge is deceived by this outward conformity by which a totally cosmic Logos takes on the *appearance* of physical form in order to defeat the Demiurge and free all those that have the inner spark to be able to live a more spiritual existence.

The missing link between these gnostic ideas and the early Christian doctrine of a Ransom to Satan is a very surprising one. It appears that the very person who was one of the most outspoken early critics of Gnosticism actually borrowed quite extensively from their ideas. His name was Irenaeus (130–c.202 CE). Rashdall commented aptly on what was happening here: “Irenaeus simply substituted the devil for the Demiurge.”<sup>6</sup> And even before Irenaeus came along, writers such as Justin Martyr were equating Jesus with the Greek Logos. Apart from these two slight changes to the leading characters, the drama remains very similar to the gnostic one. Thus, as the theory developed in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, Christ is

3. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement*, 34–35.

4. Franks, *A History of the Work of Christ I*, 16.

5. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement*, 34–35.

6. Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology*, 245. Teselle, likewise is not shy of attributing to anti-heretical writers such as Theophilus, Irenaeus, and Hyppolytus the nasty habit of appropriating the very ideas they were writing against: TeSelle, “The Cross as Ransom,” 158.

seen to take the form of a frail human delivered into the hands of the devil without the devil fully understanding that he had bitten off more than he could chew. He is deceived by outward appearances. The result is the devil's defeat and the liberation of Christ's people.

Franks points to the Marcionite gnostics as the first to use 1 Cor 2:8 (that those who crucified the Lord of glory would not have done so had they known who he was) as a New Testament precedent for the concept that the true God misleads the devil, a passage that would later be quoted very freely in patristic writings in support of the idea that God deceived the devil.<sup>7</sup> In fact, all forms of Gnosticism held in common the notion that Christ only *seemed* to be crucified. Basilides, a significant gnostic leader, has the real Christ standing by laughing while Simon of Cyrene is crucified by mistake due to Christ having engineered a deceptive change in Simon's appearance.<sup>8</sup> So the element of deception, of those crucifying Jesus being misled by appearances, is a prominent gnostic teaching that was, it seems, allowed to flow into the mainstream teaching of the church.<sup>9</sup>

## Origins 2: Emergence

This way of looking at the atonement was soon favored by most of the Fathers, but in varying forms, some more crude than others. Irenaeus, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine<sup>10</sup> each develop the ransom-to-Satan theory in cruder and cruder forms. Two elements emerged progressively, especially from Origen onwards: one, as we have already seen, was that God deceived the devil and the other was that the devil's rights over humans were legitimate.

Irenaeus only tentatively introduced the idea that the ransom spoken of in the New Testament was in fact paid to the devil, and did not emphasize the idea that the devil had any legitimate rights over humans. Here is the very first suggestion of the theory. "Apostasy" here refers to Satan:

7. Franks, *A History of the Work of Christ* I, 15.

8. According to Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1:349.

9. Likewise, TeSelle believes that the ransom motif probably arose from within various heterodox groups that were preoccupied with the idea of Christ in disguise: TeSelle, "The Cross as Ransom," 157.

10. Augustine won't be discussed here, but see his *On the Trinity* 4.14.14; 5.13.19; and 4.14.18–19.

And since the apostasy held unjust sway over us, and, though naturally we belonged to God Almighty, had estranged us from Him unnaturally, making us his own disciples, the all-powerful Word of God, who lacks not in His own righteousness, justly turned against that same apostasy, redeeming from it His own not by force, after the manner in which the devil had held sway over us at the first, greedily seizing what was not his own, but by persuasion, even as it befitted God to take what He wished by persuading and not by imposing force, so that there should neither be any infringement of justice, nor should God's ancient creation perish utterly.<sup>11</sup>

Irenaeus is clear that the devil is a usurper, having no rights. God must be in total control. Yet even with the usurper, God observes fair play.<sup>12</sup> Also, and crucially for recent feminist re-appropriations, Irenaeus "avoids mere external compulsion or blind force, even where He might legitimately be expected to use it."<sup>13</sup> Origen then takes Irenaeus' idea and adds his own emphasis:

If then we were "bought with a price," as Paul asserts, we were doubtless bought from one whose servants we were, who also named what price he would for releasing those whom he held from his power. Now it was the devil that held us, to whose side we had been drawn away by our sins. He asked, therefore, as our price the blood of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

Of note is the addition, in Origen's *Commentary on Matthew*, of the notion that the devil was deceived in the transaction:

The Evil One had been deceived and led to suppose that he was capable of mastering the soul, and did not see that to hold Him involved a trial of strength greater than he could successfully undertake.<sup>15</sup>

11. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V.1.1. "A certain justice forbade God to employ the methods characteristic of the devil." Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement*, 36.

12. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption*, 54.

13. Ibid.

14. Origen, *On Romans* II.13. Cited in Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement*, 37.

15. On Matt 25:1, 8. This is the earliest occurrence of the notion, aside from a passing reference in Ignatius' *Letter to the Ephesians*, 19. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption*, 55, n. 3.