# MAPPING ATONEMENT

*The* Doctrine *of* Reconciliation *in* Christian History *and* Theology

WILLIAM G. WITT
JOEL SCANDRETT

# MAPPING ATONEMENT

. . .

## The Doctrine *of* Reconciliation in Christian History *and* Theology

WILLIAM G. WITT
*and* JOEL SCANDRETT

BakerAcademic
*a division of Baker Publishing Group*
Grand Rapids, Michigan

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

# Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Abbreviations xi

Introduction: *What Is Atonement?* 1

1. Atonement as Incarnation: *Irenaeus and Athanasius* 15
2. Atonement as Christus Victor: *Church Fathers and Gustaf Aulén* 38
3. Atonement as Satisfaction: *Anselm of Canterbury* 61
4. Atonement as Divine Love: *Peter Abelard and the Wesleys* 82
5. Atonement as Fittingness: *Thomas Aquinas* 101
6. Atonement as Penal Substitution: *John Calvin and Charles Hodge* 126
7. Atonement as Moral Example: *Hastings Rashdall* 153
8. Atonement as Reconciliation: *Karl Barth* 176
9. Atonement Today 201

Bibliography 227

Author Index 237

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

# Introduction

## *What Is Atonement?*

If one were to summarize the heart of the Christian faith in the fewest words possible, the phrase "Jesus saves" could suffice. To say that "Jesus saves" is to say that the person and work of Jesus Christ creates a salvation that is found nowhere else and accomplished by no one else. This salvation is the solution to a specific problem: the problem of human sin and its consequences. This salvation is of universal import for all human beings because all human beings have sinned. This salvation has cosmic implications, for it entails both the restoration of fallen creation and the promise of an eschatological new creation. This salvation is the work of God, for God who is the Father of Jesus Christ has acted in the person and work of his incarnate Son to bring it about. This salvation is also the work of the Holy Spirit, who imparts it to human beings within the redeemed community of the church. And this salvation is accomplished through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in fulfillment of God's original covenant promises to Israel. Thus, the expression "Jesus saves" touches on every area of Christian theology: the doctrines of the Trinity, creation, anthropology, election and covenant, ecclesiology, and eschatology, not to mention soteriology!

That "Jesus saves" has been at the heart of Christian faith from its very beginning because it is at the heart of the New Testament. In Mark, which is generally considered to be the earliest written Gospel, Jesus says of himself, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). In Luke's account of the earliest preaching of the apostolic church, Peter proclaims: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). John's Gospel, regarded as



William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

one of the latest of the New Testament writings, contains perhaps the most familiar verse of the entire New Testament: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). In what biblical scholars believe to be an echo of one of the earliest formulations of Christian faith, Paul writes, "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3). Earlier in the same letter Paul writes: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (2:2). In Romans, Paul affirms that Jesus was "handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification" (Rom. 4.25). This witness to the salvation accomplished in Jesus's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection is found throughout the New Testament writings.

The early church continued to proclaim the saving work of Christ as the heart of the Christian message. Clement of Rome (d. 99) encourages his readers: "Let us fix our eyes on the blood of Christ and let us realize how precious it is to his Father, since it was poured out for our salvation and brought the grace of repentance to the whole world."[1] Ignatius of Antioch (d. 110) writes of "Jesus Christ's way, who for our sakes suffered death that you might believe in his death and so escape dying yourselves."[2] In his summary of the early Christian "Rule of Faith," Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–ca. 202) affirms that the church had received from the apostles the belief "in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation."[3]

This language also appears throughout the church's later ecumenical creeds and doctrinal statements. The Nicene Creed (381) confesses: "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven. . . . For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried." The Chalcedonian Definition (451) states: "We all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man . . . as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation."

Following the patristic era, the saving life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ continued to remain central to the faith of the undivided church, both in the East and in the West. In the East, John of Damascus (ca. 675–749) writes:

> Every action, therefore, and performance of miracles by Christ are most great and divine and marvelous: but the most marvelous of all is his precious cross. For no other thing has subdued death, expiated the sin of the first parent, despoiled

1. Clement of Rome, *1 Clement* 7.4.
2. Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Trallians* 2.
3. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Haer.* 1.10.1 (*ANF* 1:330).

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

> Hades, bestowed the resurrection, granted the power to us of contemning the present and even death itself, prepared the return to our former blessedness, opened the gates of Paradise, given our nature a seat at the right hand of God, and made us the children and heirs of God, except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.[4]

In the West, Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) writes in the *Summa Theologiae*, "Christ's Passion is the proper cause of the forgiveness of sins. . . . Christ's Passion causes forgiveness of sins by way of redemption. For since He is our head, then, by the Passion which He endured from love and obedience, He delivered us as His members from our sins."[5]

Despite the divisions resulting from the Protestant Reformation, the historic Western churches continued to affirm the centrality of Jesus Christ's saving work as the heart of Christian faith. The Roman Catholic Council of Trent (1545–63) in its "Decree Concerning Original Sin" affirms that "the merit of the one mediator, our Lord Jesus Christ, who has reconciled us to God in his own blood, made unto us justice, sanctification, and redemption" is the only remedy for sin.[6] The Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530) affirms faith in the "one Christ, truly God and truly human, being born of the Virgin Mary, who truly suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried that he might reconcile the Father to us and be a sacrifice not only for original guilt but also for all actual sins of human beings."[7] The Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1571) states that there is "one Christ, very God, and very Man; who truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for actual sins of men." And further: "The offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone."[8] The Reformed Heidelberg Catechism (1563) opens by asking, "What is your only comfort in life and death?" The appropriate reply is: "That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil."[9] If there is a single ecumenical confession that could be considered to reside at the

4. John of Damascus, *Fid. orth.* 4.11 (*NPNF*[2] 9:80).

5. Aquinas, *ST* III.49.1.

6. *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 5th Session, Decree Concerning Original Sin, 3.

7. Augsburg Confession, art. 3, in *Book of Concord*, 39.

8. Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, arts. 2, 31.

9. Heidelberg Catechism, q. 1.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

heart of Christian faith, that is affirmed by the apostolic church in Scripture and repeated throughout Christian history, it is the affirmation that "Jesus saves"—that in Jesus Christ's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, God has saved his people from sin and its consequences.

## The Subject Matter of Atonement Theology

Three overlapping areas of theology have traditionally dealt with the subject matter of the person and work of Jesus Christ. *Christology* focuses on the person of Christ: *who Jesus is*. Christology seeks to understand what it means that Jesus Christ is God become human. In the terminology of the Definition of Chalcedon, Jesus is one divine person with two natures: one divine and one human—"truly God and truly Man." The doctrine of the *atonement* focuses on the "work" of Christ: *what Jesus does*. Atonement deals with Jesus's incarnate mission and earthly life, his crucifixion, resurrection, ascension to and session (seating) at the right hand of God, his second coming, and how all of this accomplishes the reconciliation of sinful human beings to God. *Soteriology* focuses on *how Jesus saves us*. Soteriology seeks to explain how the person and work of Christ are made present by the Holy Spirit to human beings in the church and includes the theology of grace (justification and sanctification), ecclesiology (the nature of the church), and the sacraments.

These three overlapping theological distinctions (Christology, atonement, soteriology) are illustrated by the subject matter of the second and third articles of the Nicene Creed. The first part of the second article speaks of the subject matter traditionally associated with Christology: "one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten from the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father." The second part of the second article focuses on the work of Christ: "who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. . . . He rose again. . . . He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory. . . . His kingdom will have no end." Finally, the third article focuses on soteriology with its profession of "the Holy Spirit," "one holy Catholic and apostolic church," and "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins." While atonement theology is broadly related to and inseparable from both Christology and soteriology, it focuses primarily on the second half of the second article: how Jesus's mission—life, death, and resurrection—accomplishes the salvation of human beings.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

## Challenges Raised by the Doctrine of the Atonement

Despite all Christians universally affirming Christ's atonement, this doctrine raises several theological challenges. These challenges are our primary reason for writing this book. *First, there is no ecumenical consensus as to how the atonement was accomplished.* As shown above, the affirmation that "Jesus saves" has been a central affirmation of Christian faith from its beginning. Historically, Christians have considered the person and work of Jesus to uniquely constitute atonement. Jesus is not simply a good example for others to follow, nor is he one savior among many. Nonetheless, while the church catholic has an official Christology, which was expressed at the ecumenical councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, no similar official theology of atonement exists beyond the basic affirmation that the person and work of Jesus Christ are uniquely constitutive of human salvation. The historic churches have affirmed that only Jesus saves, but no ecumenical council or creed has ever embraced a single understanding of exactly *how* the person and work of Jesus redeems sinners from their sin. The theologically uneducated (especially in the West) might be surprised to learn that some version of the satisfaction model of Anselm of Canterbury (1033/34–1109) has never officially been embraced by the church as a whole. This crucially distinguishes the doctrine of the atonement from other doctrines, such as doctrines of the Trinity and Christology. While there is an ecumenical understanding of the triune God and the person of Jesus Christ, no such ecumenical consensus exists for the doctrine of the atonement.

Instead, a number of paradigms or models of atonement have been put forward in various epochs of the church. Some have had more influence at times than others, but none have ever been officially endorsed by the whole church. During the patristic era, incarnational approaches tended to dominate, reflecting a primary understanding of salvation as incorporation into Christ and expressed in the patristic dictum that "what is not assumed is not redeemed." In the medieval West, following the rise of scholasticism, variations on Anselm's satisfaction model dominated. The Reformation saw the rise of penal and forensic models, and modern theology has often focused on understandings of Jesus as revealer or liberator. Meanwhile in the Christian East, the incarnational model has continued to predominate to this day. While readers might assume that the model most familiar to them is preferable, church history reveals that different eras—including our own—favor different models for different theological reasons, and that different Christian traditions continue to be defined by their preference for particular models.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

*Second, the language used to describe the saving work of Jesus in the New Testament is varied, metaphorical, and symbolic.* Jesus is described in the sacrificial metaphor of the "Lamb of God." However, biblical writers also use the military language of "conquest" of sin, and the forensic imagery of judgment, pardon, and acquittal. They also employ transactional economic language in describing Jesus's death and resurrection, such as the "payment" of a debt, a "ransom," and a "redemption."

What is the relationship between the metaphorical language of Scripture and specific models of the atonement, which invariably elevate one or more biblical metaphors over others? Is Jesus a sacrificial lamb, a conquering hero, or a legal advocate? Theologians have not always adequately explained how the metaphorical language of Scripture relates to various atonement models, models that are often expressed in *non*-metaphorical language. For example, while the biblical metaphor of redemption refers to someone purchasing a slave's liberty—and is used by biblical authors to refer to the price paid by Jesus for our salvation—some theologians also use the term "redemption" more generally to refer to the whole of Christ's atoning work. Is such language faithful not only to the metaphorical dimension of Scripture but also to the *variety* of images used to describe the significance of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection for our salvation?

Furthermore, what is the relationship between this metaphorical language and the earthly Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, who lived in first-century Judea? We cannot be content to leave atonement language at the metaphorical level because such language is inherently referential—it offers insight into the nature of something else. While atonement language speaks of what God in Christ has done for us, it refers primarily not to us but to Jesus Christ, in whom salvation has been accomplished. Jesus is the one to whom the metaphors refer. Consequently, if atonement language is not to be dismissed as pious mythology, ideology, or projection, it must be meaningfully related to the real, earthly Jesus of Nazareth. And if there is no correlation between the Jesus who saves me now and the Jesus who lived in the first century—the Jesus to whom the Gospel narratives bear witness—then the claim that it is Jesus who saves me is difficult to maintain.

Unfortunately, traditional Western atonement theology has often tended to divorce in just such a manner the Jesus who saves me from the earthly Jesus of the first century. Metaphors that speak of divine judgment on sin, priestly sacrifice for sin, or victorious conquest over sin and death often have not been meaningfully related to the Jesus whom we know from the Gospel narratives—a Jesus who never held judicial or military office, who certainly was neither a Levitical priest nor a wool-bearing, four-legged animal. How

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

are we to make sense of such metaphors in a way that remains faithful to what they signify while also remaining faithful to the biblical account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth?

Here we face the danger of imposing onto a metaphor or symbol in the biblical text an interpretation found *outside* the text itself. The text centers on Jesus's identity as God's Son and the constitutive significance of Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection for our salvation. To read the Gospels in light of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus is to read them in accord with their intent. But the symbols and metaphors themselves must be understood in light of Jesus's identity and mission, not vice versa. Otherwise, we are inclined to select a metaphor or symbol to which we assign our own preferred significance and then project that significance onto the text. However, it is the actual life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that provides the normative context for interpreting the symbols, not the symbols that impose a normative significance for deciding who Jesus is and what he does. Only in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus do we see the biblical metaphors and types fulfilled.

The narrative structure of the Gospel texts tells the story of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, and these texts must provide the context for rightly understanding the relation between the earthly Jesus and the doctrine of the atonement. By listening to the referential, testimonial, and narrative content of the canonical Gospel texts, we discover the constitutive significance of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. At the level of symbol, this does not mean that the biblical atonement metaphors are merely projections—they can be understood to constitute salvation. However, these constitutive symbols must be controlled by the narrative elements and the identity of the chief protagonists in the canonical story. For example, we learn what it means for God to judge our sins in Jesus or to deliver us from sin not by a preconceived notion of law or omnipotence (whether an uncritically endorsed notion or an uncritically rejected notion) but by listening to the canonical story of Jesus.

Furthermore, atonement language speaks not only about us and our salvation and about Jesus who saves but also about the God who has saved us in Jesus Christ. The metaphorical and symbolic language about God's salvation in Christ also raises questions about God, God's relation to the world and fallen human beings, God's relation to Jesus, God's intentions in bringing salvation, and how the life, death and resurrection of this first-century Jew can have universal significance for all human beings, for all times.

One of the major insights of twentieth-century theology was the realization by Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) that there must be a correlation between God's revelation in history and God's own nature: God

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

is in himself who he is in his revelation.[10] A similar observation was made by Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1904–84) in his dictum that the economic Trinity *is* (that is, is rooted in or reflects) the immanent Trinity.[11] While not all agree with the details of Barth's or Rahner's formulations, their basic insight is correct. In a similar way, the saving work of Jesus Christ must be rooted in his identity as God become human—in a biblical Christology. Atonement theology thus has an ontological dimension (what things are in themselves) that considers the relation between Jesus's works and Jesus's being. The economic atonement reflects or is rooted in the immanent union of Jesus's divine and human natures. Thus, if Jesus's personal identity is that of God's incarnate Word (John 1:1) and Son (Heb. 1:1–3), then it is indeed correct to affirm that God himself suffered and died on the cross and that Jesus's word of forgiveness to those who "know not what they do" is God's own word of forgiveness. It may be possible and necessary to distinguish in theory between the person and work of Jesus Christ, but in reality they are inextricably related. What Jesus does reveals who Jesus is. What Jesus does points to his identity as the Word of God incarnate.

How are we to correlate these aspects of metaphor, history, and ontology, all of which are necessary to make sense of Jesus's atoning work? Here theology offers a helpful classic distinction between the orders of knowing (*ordo cognoscendi*) and of being (*ordo essendi*), which reveals that the structure of the Christian faith can be grasped at three different levels. As formulated in the doctrine of the atonement, the first level of knowing is the level of narrative and symbol. Christianity is a story whose central character is a God who speaks and acts. The story is about God, creation, and humanity and has several key chapters: creation, fall, covenant, redemption, and eschatology. Its key plot is that "Jesus saves" through his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and second coming. The story is communicated through both narratives and symbols. Christian living is a matter of being part of a community (the church) that lives out this story, that patterns its life within the parameters of the story's plotlines. Christians "inhabit" the story through reading Scripture, through worship, through prayer, through living lives that exemplify the story.

The second level is the level of history. As noted above, the narrative and symbolic character of the Christian story refers beyond itself to actual historical events—specifically, God's covenant with Israel and the life of the earthly Jesus. The story includes events that are claimed to have happened but that transcend ordinary historical causality—for example, Israel's exodus from

10. Barth, *CD* I/1.
11. Rahner, *Trinity*.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

Egypt, God's giving of the law at Sinai, and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. At the level of history, the doctrine of the atonement presupposes that God has acted uniquely to save fallen humanity in and through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

With the third level we arrive at the level of being or ontology, the *ordo essendi*. The biblical story is referential not only of God's saving acts in history but also of God's being in himself (*in se*). The story assumes that the God who is revealed in history is in himself who he is in his revelation. The God who is revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the history of Israel, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and in the church (the economic Trinity) is the tripersonal reality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in himself, from all eternity (the immanent Trinity). God is triune, three distinct relational persons in one Being.

In terms of ontology, the relation between God and creation is unique. God transcends creation yet is immediately present to it. All created being is real (because it receives its being from God), contingent (because it does not have to exist), and orderly (because God creates through his Word and is not arbitrary). In terms of ontology, humanity (anthropology) is characterized as being created in God's image (oriented toward union with God), fallen (no longer in union with God), and redeemed (restored to union with God).

Regarding Jesus's ontology (Christology), the incarnation of God in Christ means that Jesus Christ is a single divine person with a divine and human nature (hypostatic union)—fully divine and fully human (Nicaea and Chalcedon). The relation between Jesus's person and work in the atonement means that Jesus Christ's death and resurrection are *constitutive*, not merely *illustrative*, of salvation.

All three levels are integrally related and depend on one another. The three different levels can be approached from the direction of either knowledge or being. In the *ordo cognoscendi* (narrative and symbol), the source of knowledge is, first, Scripture and, second, the creeds, preaching, the worship of the church, tradition, and so on (level 1). In terms of history (level 2), the fundamental Christian claim is that God is in himself who God is in his revelation. The God who revealed himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the history of Israel, in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit's presence in the church is the triune God who in himself is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the *ordo essendi* (level 3), the triune reality is first. God reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in history because God is first Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (in himself) from all eternity.

Why is this important? Because any adequate discussion of the atonement needs to take all three levels of knowing and being into account and must show how narrative and symbol, the history of the earthly Jesus, and

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

the ontology of divine and created realities are integrated in Jesus's atoning work. Any good account of what it means to say that "Jesus saves" will do this well, whereas a poor account will tend to focus more exclusively on only one of the three levels of knowing and being. Thus, accounts that focus exclusively on the metaphorical language of atonement often reduce Jesus to a good example among others. Accounts that focus exclusively on ontology can reduce atonement to a timeless eternal transaction between the Father and the Son—as in some variations of the satisfaction theory. Accounts that focus solely on the historical Jesus fail to explain why this one man's death should be significant for all people in all times. Various atonement models also omit the significance of God's covenant with Israel or focus narrowly on one aspect of the history of the earthly Jesus: the incarnation simply as an event (some incarnational models), Jesus's life and teaching as an example (some moral example or influence models), and Jesus's death on the cross to the exclusion of his earthly mission and his resurrection (some satisfaction models). However, keeping all three levels of theological knowledge in view illuminates points of connection or disconnection by which to judge whether a given model of atonement does justice to the whole of atonement theology.

*Third, a deeply divisive contemporary theological issue concerns constitutive and illustrative understandings of atonement*. The above references—first to Scripture and then to the history of theology—have shown that, from the beginning, the Christian tradition has understood the expression "Jesus saves" to mean that Jesus actually *creates* a salvation that sinful human beings are unable to provide for themselves. Thus, *both* Jesus's personal identity *and* his mission are unique and have universal significance for all human beings. If Jesus Christ saves sinful human beings, then no one else does, and anyone who is saved is saved by Jesus and Jesus alone. This understanding of Jesus's person and work as constitutive for salvation has been characteristic of the universal catholic and evangelical tradition of the church.

However, in the last few centuries a new understanding has arisen. The position that Jesus's mission is *illustrative* rather than constitutive of atonement has become the dominant understanding in much of modern theology since Friedrich Schleiermacher. That is, much modern theology does not interpret atonement language to mean that Jesus uniquely creates our salvation from sin, death, and judgment but rather takes such language to be an illustration or example of a salvation that can be found elsewhere or perhaps even everywhere. Proponents talk about Jesus as "a way" of salvation or Jesus as Savior "for Christians" but suggest that there are other paths of salvation for those of other religions or perhaps of no religion at all. As we will see, this is a crucial issue in any contemporary discussion of the atonement: Is the life, death, and

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

resurrection of Jesus *constitutive* of a salvation found nowhere else, or is it *illustrative* of a salvation that may also be found elsewhere?[12]

To further muddy the waters, many contemporary theological discussions confuse this issue by identifying some particular model of constitutive atonement—often a variation of the satisfaction or penal substitution models—as the only possible "objective" model, thus implying that the only options for atonement theology are those between "objective" satisfaction/penal substitution and "subjective" liberal exemplarism or the like. One of the purposes of this book is to make clear that there have been (and continue to be) a number of ways of speaking objectively and constitutively about atonement in the history of Christian theology.

## Structure of the Book

Each of the following chapters focuses on a particular atonement paradigm: its historical origin and development, its central assumptions and reasoning, its significance for one or more Christian traditions, and its relative strengths and weaknesses. Each paradigm is identified as belonging to one of three basic types, corresponding broadly to the three types of atonement summarized in Gustaf Aulén's classic work *Christus Victor*, which we will discuss in subsequent chapters.

Type 1 includes models that are broadly incarnational and ontological, focusing on the incarnation and the hypostatic union. Such models tend toward a *theōsis/deification* soteriology that emphasizes participation in (or ontological union with) Christ.

The first subset of Type 1 models falls under the category of incarnation/recapitulation and focuses on the assumption of human nature by the divine Logos in the person of Jesus Christ as the central locus of atonement (chap. 1). Primary representatives include Irenaeus of Lyons, Athanasius of Alexandria, and Cyril of Alexandria. Later Western examples include sixteenth-century Anglican divines Richard Hooker and Lancelot Andrewes, as well as nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglicans. More contemporary examples include Thomas F. Torrance and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

The second subset of Type 1 models includes the Christus Victor model and focuses on Jesus's defeat of the powers of sin, death, and Satan, both in his earthly ministry and ultimately in his resurrection and ascension (chap. 2).

12. The distinction between a constitutive and an illustrative understanding of the atonement is made by Vernon White in *Atonement and Incarnation*.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

This is the model often associated with Gustaf Aulén's well-known book by that name. Historical examples include Irenaeus (again), Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory the Great, and Rufinus. Aulén names Martin Luther as the primary Reformation example of Christus Victor, though this is disputed. Aulén himself remains the primary modern example. Contemporary Mennonite theologian J. Denny Weaver employs a version of the Christus Victor model, as does Gregory Boyd.

Type 2 includes models that focus specifically on the death of Christ and are broadly concerned with questions of forgiveness of sin, judgment, and guilt. The soteriology of Type 2 models tends to be substitutional or forensic, focusing on the manner in which Christ's death functions to restore relationship between God and human beings.

A first subset of Type 2 models are satisfaction models, which focus principally on Jesus's death as a satisfaction of God's honor/justice. Anselm of Canterbury is the foremost historic advocate of this model (chap. 3). Thomas Aquinas was its most articulate medieval exponent but differs from Anselm in significant ways (chap. 5). Contemporary examples include Roman Catholic Walter Kasper and Lutheran Wolfhart Pannenberg.

A second subset of Type 2 models are substitution models that focus on forensic justice and justification. Substitution models focus on Jesus's death in place of sinners. This theme appears in the Reformation in Luther's notion of the "great exchange." We will focus on John Calvin as the primary Reformation example (chap. 6). Karl Barth both incorporated and modified a forensic model in his essay "The Judge Judged in Our Place" in *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 (chap. 8). In the modern theology of Protestants such as Charles Hodge and later evangelical theologians, the substitution model modifies into penal substitution. Penal substitution arguably contains satisfaction and forensic themes as well.

Type 3 includes models that are principally exemplarist and moral, focusing primarily on the notion of Christ as an example or primary representative of salvation. The soteriological scope of this type is subjective rather than ontological or forensic. While Type 1 and 2 models are variations on constitutive understandings of atonement, Type 3 models incline toward what we have called illustrative understandings of the atonement. Insofar as they include constitutive themes from the previous two types, some Type 3 models attempt to balance the objectivity of Type 1 and 2 models with a focus on God's love in Christ toward redeemed sinners and on subjective human responses of love and gratitude.

The first subset of Type 3 models would be moral influence. The moral influence approach emphasizes the atonement as the revelation or operation

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

of God's love and the human response of love of God and neighbor that it engenders in those who are reconciled to God. Peter Abelard is the classic medieval example of this approach (chap. 4). Modern figures who focus on God's love revealed in Christ include John and Charles Wesley, George MacDonald, C. S. Lewis, and among Roman Catholics, Karl Rahner. The Wesleys, MacDonald, and Lewis show that a moral influence model need not necessarily be merely subjectivist.

A second subset of Type 3 would be moral example. The moral example approach tends to view Jesus as a moral figure to be imitated. Liberal Protestantism has tended to embrace this model. Examples include Friedrich Schleiermacher, Horace Bushnell, Hastings Rashdall, Adolf von Harnack, and some recent liberation and feminist theologians (chap. 7). This model comes closest to understanding Jesus's role as illustratively providing one example among others and to understanding the salvation God offers as being available not only in Jesus but wherever human beings engage in the kind of self-sacrificial behavior that Jesus models. Other examples of Type 3 atonement arguably would include the metaphor of Jesus Christ as "perfect penitent," found in Robert Moberley's *Atonement and Personality*. Some have suggested that nineteenth-century Scottish theologian John McLeod Campbell is an example of Type 3 theology.[13] However, Campbell endorses an ontological exemplarism that echoes patristic incarnational models.

Religious pluralism exemplifies an illustrative model of atonement taken to an extreme. Its most articulate modern proponent would be John Hick. Hick has argued that traditional understandings of incarnation and atonement are inadequate for a modern age in which Christians are more aware of the existence and moral significance of other religions. Rather than being understood as a unique savior, Jesus should be understood to represent one path to salvation, a path followed by Christians but neither demanded nor expected of those who practice other faiths.

After providing an overview of historical and contemporary models of the atonement, the book closes with a final chapter addressing atonement today. The chapter will begin with a discussion of the current controversy among evangelical theologians concerning penal substitution. A discussion of the atonement theology of Thomas F. Torrance will provide both comparison and contrast. The chapter will conclude with our own reflections and recommendations for what it means to say "Jesus saves."

13. Campbell, *Nature of the Atonement*.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

# 1

# Atonement as Incarnation

## *Irenaeus and Athanasius*

Did the early church have a doctrine of atonement? An argument could be made to the contrary. While the church fathers used language and images of Jesus's reconciling work largely borrowed from Scripture, they did not explain in detail their understanding of these metaphors and images. Unlike the controversies over the doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity, which occasioned the ecumenical councils and formulations of the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Definition, atonement was not a subject of controversy. The closest thing to an ecumenical affirmation would be the simple statement of the Council of Nicaea regarding the incarnate Christ: "who, for us and our salvation, came down from heaven," and "for our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate."[1]

However, the language of worship of the early church refers regularly to atonement. The liturgical hymn "Gloria in Excelsis Deo" prays, "Lord God, Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us."[2] Liturgies of the ancient church contain within the eucharistic prayer (*anaphora*) (1) an institution narrative, which recites Jesus's words at the Last Supper referring to his body "given for you" and his blood "shed for you and for many for

1. The Chalcedonian Definition does not speak of the purpose for which the Word became incarnate.

2. Cobb, "Liturgy of the Word in the Early Church," 183.



William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

the forgiveness of sins" and (2) a call to remember (*anamnēsis*) Jesus's deeds in his words, "Do this in remembrance of me," referring to Jesus's crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and second coming. These and other writings of the early church also refer to Jesus's death as a "sacrifice."[3] Catechetical instruction given to converts also addressed the significance of Jesus's "being crucified for us" and "dying for our sins" without providing theological theories or explanations.[4] A collective assessment of these approaches might be called an "affirmation" rather than an "explanation" of atonement.[5]

There is thus no single model of atonement in the early church but rather a rich variety of images and metaphors.[6] Nonetheless, early Christian discussions of atonement tended to be oriented around what we will call an "incarnational" approach. Modern theologians have often dismissed this approach as "physical" and the related Christus Victor model as "mythological."[7] However, the incarnational model would be more accurately designated "ontological" or "onto-relational" and is associated positively with key patristic concepts of salvation such as "re-creation" and "deification."

Accordingly, this chapter will focus on two major patristic theologians: Irenaeus of Lyons and Athanasius of Alexandria. Both were involved in controversy with heretical understandings of Christianity: Irenaeus with Gnosticism and Athanasius with Arianism. Both responded to these inadequate understandings with theologies that focused on the incarnation, especially on the unity of the person of Christ in the incarnation. However, while focusing on the incarnation, their primary concern was soteriological. They believed that it was vital to understand who Jesus is in order to understand what it means that "Jesus saves." Controversy prompted them to articulate a theology that included an incarnational understanding of atonement: Why did God become human?

## Irenaeus

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–c. 202) can be credited with a number of firsts: he was the author of the "first comprehensive Christian theology."[8] He was arguably the Christian church's first "biblical theologian." He developed a

3. See Daly, *Christian Sacrifice*; Daly, *Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice*.
4. See especially Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 13 (*NPNF*$^2$ 7:82–93).
5. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 163; similarly, Pelikan, *Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 141–42.
6. Turner, *Patristic Doctrine of Redemption*, 11–28.
7. Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 2:236–94; Rashdall, *Idea of Atonement*, 240–48.
8. Osborn, "Irenaeus of Lyons," 122.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

comprehensive theology based on a reading of the Hebrew Scriptures (in the Greek Septuagint) and the apostolic writings of the Gospels and Epistles as one Bible composed of Old and New Testaments.[9] And he was the first theologian to develop a comprehensive theology of creation, fall, and reconciliation.[10]

In what follows we will see that "unity" is the theme that holds Irenaeus's theology together. Irenaeus's gnostic opponents were dualists who focused on discontinuity: a discontinuity between spirit and matter; a divide between divine and physical realities bridged through a chain of emanations; a divided reading of Scripture in which the Creator God of the Old Testament was a different entity from God the Father of Jesus; a divided canon in which some books (especially the Old Testament) were rejected and other books (gnostic gospels) added; a "divided" hermeneutic by which the Scriptures were read through the lens of dualist gnostic speculation; and a division between the elite, "more spiritual" gnostics and the ordinary, "less spiritual" unenlightened.

Over against this gnostic dualism, Irenaeus focused on unity: the unity of the Creator God and God the Father of Jesus Christ; the unity of creation and the economy of salvation; the unity of the covenant people of the Old Testament, the apostles, and the post-apostolic church as the people of God; the unity of the Scriptures as a single canon composed of Old and New Testaments; the unity of God and humanity in the incarnation of God in Christ; the unity of the atonement as the re-creation and union of humanity with Christ through the indwelling Holy Spirit; and the unity of human beings and their material bodies in the original creation, in reconciliation, and in the resurrection. For Irenaeus, "redemption is essentially an at-one-ment."[11] Indeed, Irenaeus's entire approach to theology can be read as an "at-one-ment."[12]

### *The One Economy of Salvation: The Rule of Faith*

The hermeneutical key that Irenaeus uses to summarize the essential subject matter of Christian belief is the "Rule of Faith" or "Canon of Truth"—an early outline of Christian belief that also appears in the writings of church fathers such as Tertullian of Carthage and Clement of Alexandria. Variations

9. On Irenaeus's reading of Scripture, see Greer, "Christian Bible and Its Interpretation," 163–76; Young, "Interpretation of Scripture," 24–27; Holsinger-Friesen, *Irenaeus and Genesis*; Behr, *Way to Nicaea*, 111–33; Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons*.

10. Turner, *Patristic Doctrine of Redemption*, 74–77.

11. Hochban, "Irenaeus on the Atonement," 548.

12. See Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 163; Young, "Interpretation of Scripture," 25; Hochban, "Irenaeus on the Atonement," 526; Donovan, *One Right Reading?*, 71; Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 9; Boersma, "Redemptive Hospitality in Irenaeus," 208.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

of Irenaeus's following statement of the Rule appear several times in his two works *Against Heresies* and *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*:

> The Church, though dispersed through out the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: [She believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His [future] manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father "to gather all things in one," and to raise up anew all flesh of the whole human race.[13]

Note that the Rule has a threefold trinitarian structure and is simultaneously a narrative, a history, and an ontology. It provides a summary of the Christian story, refers to certain crucial historical events, and presumes a trinitarian ontology of creation, incarnation, and reconciliation. Note also that there is a reciprocal relationship between the Rule and Scripture. The Rule is both a summary of the key themes of the biblical narrative and an indispensable hermeneutical tool by which to read that narrative correctly. The Rule contrasts sharply with the way the gnostics read the Scriptures, which Irenaeus famously compares to someone disassembling the stones of a beautiful mosaic of a king, reassembling those stones into an ugly mosaic of a fox, then claiming that this is the portrait of the king. The Rule and the gnostic hermeneutic do not amount to different but equally valid ways of reading Scripture. The Rule's reading is derived from Scripture, while the gnostic interpretation is an alien imposition upon it (*Haer.* 1.8.1). Frances Young aptly summarizes, "The problem with the heretics was that, in their wild speculations, they had lost the plot."[14]

### *The One God: Trinity in Unity*

Against the gnostic affirmation of numerous "emanations" forming a descending chain of being from the divine to the material realm, Irenaeus repeatedly emphasizes the unity of God (*Haer.* 2.1.2). There is one God, the Creator of heaven and earth and especially of humanity, who has revealed himself in his covenant with Israel and especially in Jesus Christ, and who will

13. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.10.1 (*ANF* 1:330–31).
14. Young, "Interpretation of Scripture," 25.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

finally bring creation to its original intended conclusion in the eschaton (2.1.1; 2.16.3; 3.10.5; 3.11.7; 3.12.11; 4.1.1). This one God created the entire universe freely from nothing (2.10.4); he did not create because he was incomplete or needed anything besides himself to complete his being. One of the chief distinctions between God and creatures is that God is without beginning or end and needs nothing (2.2.4, 5). Whatever else exists does so because God has granted it existence. All creatures thus have a beginning, can cease to exist, and are dependent on God (3.8.3). God is the omnipotent Creator of all that is, including matter. There is no second God (2.16.3; 2.28.7; 2.30.9).

However, this one God who created the world is not a monad. From eternity, God is triune; the Son and the Holy Spirit are God's Word and Wisdom, the "two hands" through whom God makes all things and in whose image he has created human beings (*Haer.* 2.28.5; 3.6.1; 3.18.1; 4.Preface.4; 4.20.1; 4.20.3). The Word and Spirit are not only the "two hands" by which God creates but also those through whom God speaks in the Scriptures and saves the world. God's wisdom is manifested through the Son in creation; God's love is manifested through the Spirit in salvation. Through the Son and the Holy Spirit, God's goodness is demonstrated in creation, in reconciliation, and in salvation as participation in the triune life. The triune God is known especially through his acts, specifically his covenant with Israel and his salvation in Jesus Christ. Because God is love, we know God through the love revealed by the incarnate Word in atonement, not through abstract speculation (2.30.9; 3.6.2; 3.6.4; 3.12.11; 3.15.3; 3.18.1; 4.1.1; 4.20.1, 4, 6).

### *Humanity Created in the Image of God*

The same theological principles governing the general creation apply in Irenaeus's discussion of the creation of humanity. Like other creatures, human beings are the direct creation of God's "two hands," the Son and the Spirit. God did not create humanity because he needed us to complete his purposes. He has always possessed the Son and the Spirit, by whom he "freely and spontaneously" made all things, including humanity (*Haer.* 4.20.1). Human beings are thus a "subset of a wider created order."[15] At the same time, human beings are distinct from the rest of creation insofar as humanity has been created "in the image of God." Irenaeus understands the image of God in humanity to have a trinitarian form: "For by the hands of the Father, that is, by the Son and the Holy Spirit, man, and not [merely] a part of man, was made in the likeness of God" (5.6.1). In creation, "the Word of the Father and the

15. Holsinger-Friesen, *Irenaeus and Genesis*, 115.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

Spirit of God, having become united with the ancient substance of Adam's formation, rendered man living and perfect, receptive of the perfect Father" (5.1.3). As such, humanity is "conformable to and modeled after [God's] own Son." Contrary to gnostic matter/spirit dualism, Irenaeus understands human being to be a unity, a composite of soul and spirit united to a "fleshly nature." However, it is the presence of the Holy Spirit that makes the human being complete: soul, spirit, and body are not "humanity" but aspects of humanity. Importantly, Irenaeus frequently distinguishes between the "image" and the "likeness" of God.[16] Without the Spirit, the "image" composed of "soul" and "flesh" is "imperfect." It is the presence of the Spirit that makes the human being "perfect," now existing not only in the image of God but also in his likeness (5.6.1; cf. 5.9.3; 5.12.2).

Here we see one of the distinctive characteristics of Irenaeus's understanding of creation in bringing together protology and eschatology. The human being is teleological: both creation and salvation are seen as *a process with a goal*. At creation, the human being was not yet complete but needed to progress toward completion. Indeed, Irenaeus suggests that Adam and Eve were created as children, not yet fully mature (*Haer.* 4.38.1). While God himself is perfect and does not change, creatures need to advance toward perfection (4.38.3).

Crucial to this notion of progress in perfection are the notions of "free will" and "persuasion." God made the human being so that humanity could obey the commands of God voluntarily, not by compulsion (*Haer.* 4.4.3). Freedom of will is part of what it means to be created in the image of God, since God has free will. God always acts without coercion, exercising a good will toward all. Human beings are capable of obeying and of disobeying God (4.37.1, 2, 4; 4.38.1; 4.39.1). Insofar as our first parents disobeyed, they interrupted this process of growth and introduced death into the world. Humanity continued to exist in the image of God but lost the presence of God's Spirit and thus God's "likeness." Humanity without the Spirit of God is "dead" (5.9.3). As God is good and obedience to God is life, to disobey God is evil and leads to death. "Death" is not an extraneous punishment for sin; rather, sin is its own intrinsic and deadly punishment: "Those who fly from the eternal light of God, which contains in itself all good things, are themselves the cause to themselves of their inhabiting eternal darkness" (4.39.4).

The fall of humanity led to spiritual death (loss of the Holy Spirit), which resulted in physical death. Consequently, the descendants of Adam and Eve

16. Sometimes, however, Irenaeus writes as if image and likeness are identical. See Holsinger-Friesen, *Irenaeus and Genesis*, 109–11.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

inherited both the image of God and the consequences of their sin. God had compassion, however, not only on Adam and Eve's posterity but on Adam and Eve as well. They were driven from paradise because God pitied them and wanted to prevent their sin from continuing forever. Death was a blessing, putting an end to sin so that humanity could die to sin and live to God (*Haer.* 3.23.1–8). If, in humanity's original creation, the way toward completion was a gradual process of perfection, the restoration of humanity in atonement is similar. God restores humanity to liberty through a gradual historical process of persuasion. The gradual path of reconciliation began in the covenant with God's Old Testament people and is eventually fulfilled in the new covenant of the incarnation of the Son of God (4.9.3).

### *Incarnation*

Why, according to Irenaeus, did God become human in Jesus Christ? Why did the Word become flesh? Irenaeus's basic answer is that we—humanity—needed salvation but that we are unable to save ourselves. Only God can save us, and he does this personally by the Son of God becoming incarnate as Jesus Christ (*Haer.* 3.18.2; 3.20.3). Irenaeus summarizes the purpose of the incarnation (and atonement) in language that anticipates the later patristic dictum that *God became human, so that humanity might become divine*: "For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God" (3.19.1). "The only true and steadfast Teacher, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ . . . did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself" (5.Preface).

It is because the incarnate Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully human that he is able to act as mediator between God and humanity, joining together God and humanity in himself, creating a new friendship and harmony between them, presenting humanity to God and revealing God to humanity. Because he is God, Jesus securely possesses salvation, and can give it freely. Because he is human, Jesus is able to join humanity to God, enabling us to participate in immortality as God intended. And as the incarnate God, through the process of "recapitulation" (which we will discuss below), Jesus passes through every stage of human life, reversing Adam's failure and restoring humanity to communion with God (*Haer.* 3.18.7), thus setting humanity back on the path of progress toward Godlikeness.

Thus, in contrast to gnostic dualism, Irenaeus emphasizes the unity of Jesus Christ as the Word made flesh, the unity of Jesus as the Second Person

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

of the Trinity (the Son of God incarnate) with God, and the unity of Christ's person and work in the economy of salvation. Irenaeus emphasizes both the complete deity and the complete humanity of Jesus Christ as the Word of God incarnate. The only-begotten Word, who is always present with humanity, "united to and mingled with His own creation" and "is Himself Jesus Christ our Lord, who did also suffer for us, and rose again on our behalf, and who will come again in the glory of His Father." Accordingly, Jesus Christ is also in every respect human, having taken humanity into himself. As the Word incarnate, Jesus Christ is "the invisible becoming visible, the incomprehensible being made comprehensible, the impassible becoming capable of suffering, and the Word being made man, thus summing up all things in Himself" (*Haer.* 3.16.6; cf. 3.11.5; 5.18.3).

As human, Jesus Christ is everything that we are, having "a body taken from the earth, and a soul receiving spirit from God." In becoming human, the Word recapitulated his own handiwork, and thus is rightly called "Son of man" (*Haer.* 3.22.1). As the humanity that was lost and needed saving had "flesh and blood," so the incarnate Word himself took on "flesh and blood": "The righteous flesh has reconciled that flesh which was being kept under bondage in sin, and brought it into friendship with God" (5.14.2). Jesus Christ is both the one true human being (the prototype of Adam in whose image humanity was created) and also the one in whom the lost image of God is restored. While humanity is said to have been created after the image of God, the Word incarnate actually "shows" the image of God. The eternal Word is the invisible image who, by becoming visible, restores humanity to that image (5.16.2).

Also as human, Jesus underwent the complete range of human experience. He was baptized and he celebrated the Passover in Jerusalem as did Jews of his time. He did not merely seem to be human (in a docetic fashion) but was that which he appeared to be. As we will see below, he sanctified human experience by living through the complete span of human life: infancy, childhood, youth, and adulthood. Finally, he experienced death itself (*Haer.* 2.22.4).

Since Adam had lost the presence of the Holy Spirit (and so the "likeness" of the divine image), it was necessary that Jesus be anointed with the Spirit at the time of his baptism in order to restore the divine image to human being. Jesus's anointing with the Spirit should not be understood in an adoptionist manner, however. "Christ" did not descend upon Jesus as upon a separate person—as if "Christ" and "Jesus" were two separate individuals. Rather, the Word of God, who is personally identical with Jesus, took on human flesh and was anointed with the Spirit by the Father, in order that fallen humanity might be saved through participation in Jesus's anointing by the Holy Spirit

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

(*Haer.* 3.9.3). Thus, the name "Jesus Christ" points to the triune unity: it is the Father who anoints, the Son who is anointed, and the Holy Spirit who is the divine unction with which the Son is anointed (3.18.3).

One of the primary functions of the Word of God is to reveal God the Creator. He does this first by means of the created order itself, which declares that it has the Lord as its maker; second, in the creation of humanity; and third, through the history of salvation. The Word preached both himself and his Father through the Old Testament prophets. In becoming incarnate, the Word has made himself visible: "All saw the Father in the Son: for the Father is the invisible of the Son, but the Son the visible of the Father" (*Haer.* 4.6.6). The Son administers all things for the Father, and it is only through the Son that human beings can come to know God: "For the Son is the knowledge of the Father; but the knowledge of the Son is in the Father, and has been revealed through the Son; and this was the reason why the Lord declared: 'No man knoweth the Son, but the Father; nor the Father, save the Son, and those to whomsoever the Son shall reveal [Him]'" (4.6.7).

Thus, for Irenaeus one of Jesus's primary tasks as the Word incarnate was that of teacher. Human beings could learn about their Creator only by seeing their teacher, hearing his voice with their own ears, imitating both his words and his works, and so having communion with the Word who existed prior to creation (*Haer.* 5.1.1). There are similarities between Irenaeus's understanding of Jesus's task as teacher and the later "exemplarist" models of the atonement. However, in Irenaeus's understanding of atonement, the incarnate Jesus Christ did more than provide an example for others to follow. Jesus Christ's reconciling work is not merely pedagogical; it accomplishes something ontologically. Jesus's incarnate life, death, and resurrection are constitutive, not merely illustrative, of atonement.

### *Recapitulation*

However, the purpose of the incarnation is not merely ontological in the sense that the incarnation alone might save human beings. The incarnation is also reparative, restorative, and redemptive. The Word became incarnate to defeat sin and death.[17] The word that Irenaeus characteristically uses to describe Christ's atoning work is "recapitulation" (Latin *recapitulatio* from Greek *anakephalaiōsis*). Derived from Romans 13:9 and especially Ephesians 1:10, the word means to "regather" or "sum up."[18] The notion here is that Jesus Christ has *joined again to himself those who have been separated by*

17. Boersma, "Redemptive Hospitality in Irenaeus," 214.
18. Irenaeus cites Eph. 1:10 in *Haer.* 1.10.1; 3.16.6; *Epid.* 30.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

*sin*. Christ is the "head" (*kephalē*) of the communion between God and humanity (Eph. 1:22). For Irenaeus, the main idea is that in the incarnation, Jesus Christ has "regathered" or brought into unity that which has become separated, restoring humanity to its intended unity. As the second Adam, Jesus brings reconciliation by "recapitulating" the human condition. Where Adam failed, Jesus has succeeded. He has undergone every aspect of human life, accomplishing atonement through his incarnation, death, and resurrection.[19] Recapitulation "corrects and perfects mankind; it inaugurates and consummates a new humanity."[20] What follows is an overview of some of the key themes in Irenaeus's discussion of recapitulation.

Irenaeus's main use of recapitulation is not simply to contrast Adam with Christ (following Paul's discussion in Rom. 5) but to present Jesus Christ as the "second Adam" who "undoes" Adam's disobedience by undergoing a complete human experience, constantly yielding obedience rather than disobedience, at every stage succeeding where Adam had failed. As death and sin came through Adam's disobedience, so salvation comes through Jesus's obedience. As Adam was formed from the dust of the earth without a human father, so the Word was born of the Virgin Mary without a human father. Christ was not formed from the dust of the earth but was born of a human mother because he was not a completely new being; rather, he recapitulated the same humanity that Adam had possessed (*Haer.* 3.21.10; 3.22.1). As sin came into the world through a tree (the tree of temptation in Eden), so salvation came through another tree (the cross of Christ) (5.17.3; 5.19.1). In his famous parallel between Mary and Eve, Irenaeus suggests a kind of parallel recapitulation to that involving Christ and Adam. As sin came into the world through a disobedient virgin (Eve), so salvation came into the world through the obedience of another virgin (Mary the mother of Jesus) (3.22.4; 5.19.1).

The two most significant parallels between Adam and Jesus drawn by Irenaeus concern the temptation narratives and Jesus's death on the cross.[21] While Adam succumbed to temptation in the garden, Jesus resisted Satan's temptations in the desert (*Haer.* 5.21–23). Likewise, through Jesus's obedience concerning a tree, his death on the cross did away with Adam's disobedience concerning a tree (5.16.3). Jesus's death "summed up" and reversed the death of Adam and his descendants as an essential aspect of recapitulation (5.22.2).

19. Lawson, *Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus*, 140–44.

20. Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 97.

21. Boersma, "Redemptive Hospitality in Irenaeus," 218; Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation*, 118–19.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

Ireneaus employs another image to speak of recapitulation—that of Jesus Christ as the "new man." As humans were brought into bondage and made subject to death by the disobedience of our first parents, so we have been "cleansed," "washed," and come to share in God's life through the "new man" Jesus (*Haer.* 4.22.1).

Irenaeus also speaks of atonement as "communion," a restoring of the Holy Spirit and a sharing in Jesus's death and resurrection: "The Lord thus has redeemed us through His own blood, giving His soul for our souls, and His flesh for our flesh, and has also poured out the Spirit of the Father for the union and communion of God and man, imparting indeed God to men by means of the Spirit, and, on the other hand, attaching man to God by His own incarnation, and bestowing upon us at His coming immortality durably and truly, by means of communion with God" (*Haer.* 5.1.1).

Referring to Jesus's death and resurrection, Irenaeus uses the language of "persuasion." The fall into sin had enslaved humanity by violence, but the Word incarnate saves us by the nonviolent means of the "persuasion" of the cross. Although willingly the victim of others' violence in the crucifixion, the all-powerful God does not himself use violent means to accomplish his ends in redemption (*Haer.* 5.1.1).

Irenaeus also uses the language of forgiveness and reconciliation. By disobeying God's commandments, we have become his enemies, but through Christ's incarnation, he has made us his friends. By taking on human flesh and "redeeming us by his blood," Jesus has reconciled those who were formerly enemies (*Haer.* 5.14.3). When Jesus pronounced forgiveness of sins to those whom he healed, he showed not only that he had the authority to forgive sins but further that it was he who had been sinned against in the beginning. By forgiving sins, Jesus not only healed people but made clear who he was, since only God can forgive sin (5.17.1–3; 5.14.3).

Irenaeus refers to Christ having "died for us" (*Haer.* 3.16.9) and having "redeemed us by his blood" (3.16.9; 4.20.2; 5.1.1; 5.2.1–2; 5.14.1–3), making clear that the incarnation alone is not enough to save sinful humanity but that the cross has a special significance. However, in Irenaeus's understanding of "redemption," the cross does not stand apart from Jesus's incarnation, life, teaching, and resurrection. When Irenaeus writes of redemption through Christ's blood, he mentions the incarnation and the resurrection in the same context (3.16.9; 4.20.2; 5.2.1).

A crucial issue of concern for Irenaeus's interpreters is what to make of this language of Christ dying for us and redemption through his blood. Did Irenaeus understand Jesus's death in ways comparable to later models of the atonement: as a substitution, a judicial or penal satisfaction, a sacrifice?

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

Irenaeus clearly understood recapitulation to mean that God himself has taken on our lot in the incarnation; that, in Christ, God himself has undergone the full extent of human existence; and that through the incarnation, life, crucifixion, and resurrection, Jesus reversed the consequences of human sin and has delivered humanity from sin and death. By contrast, commentators tend to deny any notion of satisfaction or penal substitution in Irenaeus's atonement theology.[22] Irenaeus does use the language of "propitiation" in one passage (*Haer.* 4.8.2); however, "such references do remain sparse."[23]

One more atonement image appears regularly in Irenaeus: the military language of battle and the defeat of sin, death, and the devil that has become associated with the Christus Victor model of atonement. This is a central theme in Irenaeus's theology, but it will be the topic of a separate chapter.

### *Concluding Reflections on Irenaeus*

Our discussion of Irenaeus concludes with some summary reflections. First, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is central to Irenaeus's understanding of atonement, but Irenaeus does not reduce atonement to incarnation—as some writers have mistakenly claimed.[24] Rather, Irenaeus has an integrated understanding of the relation between the incarnation and atonement that is directly related to his understanding of what it means that Jesus saves.

Second, Irenaeus's understandings of incarnation and soteriology repeat the same themes and are closely related to the rest of his theology. His doctrines of creation, of the economy of salvation, and of the Scriptures find their unity in and point to Christ. As christological themes regularly appear in other aspects of his theology, so the above themes set the stage for his discussion of Christology and atonement.

Third, atonement and salvation are directly related to Irenaeus's doctrine of creation. Christology and atonement are primarily about the re-creation of humanity in the image of God, as becomes evident in Irenaeus's repeated references to "recapitulation."[25]

Fourth, as Irenaeus understands creation to be a teleological process, so he understands atonement to be a process.[26] Accordingly, the atonement is not restricted to a specific moment in the life of Jesus, whether the birth of Christ or the death of Christ. Rather, it is Jesus Christ's entire personal mission—

22. Oxenham, *Catholic Doctrine of the Atonement*, 128; Lawson, *Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus*, 193.

23. Boersma, "Redemptive Hospitality in Irenaeus," 220.

24. Wingren refers to this misreading in *Man and the Incarnation*, 82.

25. Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation*, 84.

26. Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation*, 81.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and second coming—that constitutes atonement and salvation.

Fifth, this means that Jesus's humanity is central to Irenaeus's understanding of atonement. While Jesus Christ's personal identity as the Son of God and Second Person of the Trinity is crucial to soteriology—only God can save—God must restore humanity from within. The Son of God restores humanity by acting as a human.[27]

Sixth, Irenaeus understands atonement as an entirely gracious move from God to humanity—that is, atonement is not necessary because of a "demand" or "need" on God's part for either satisfaction or justice. Rather, humanity, because of our fallen sinfulness, needs atonement and must be re-created in order to be rescued and restored from sin and death.

Finally, while Irenaeus focuses primarily on an "incarnational" model of the atonement, less prominent themes connected with other atonement models appear in his work as well: exemplar (Christ as exemplar and teacher), Christus Victor (victory over Satan, death, and sin), and even some aspects of substitution or propitiation.

## Athanasius

Like Irenaeus, Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 297–373) forged his theology amid theological controversy. His contention with fellow Christian Arius (also of Alexandria) led to the first ecumenical council at Nicaea and remained at the center of Athanasius's career as bishop and theologian. The theological background to Arianism arose from unresolved ambiguities in early Christology, especially those introduced by the great third-century Alexandrian theologian, Origen (ca. 184–ca. 253). On the one hand, Origen affirmed the eternal generation of the Son from the Father; on the other hand, he affirmed that the Son was in some sense subordinate to and of a lesser being than the Father. Origen also seems to have taught that creation itself is eternal.[28] In addition, the second-century apologists (especially Justin Martyr) tended to speak of the Word (*logos*) as a mediatory figure between God and creation. The apologists focused on Proverbs 8:22—"The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, / the first of his acts of long ago"—as a description of the Word's role in creation, while at the same time affirming the Word's eternity and co-existence with the Father.[29]

27. Lawson, *Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus*, 153.
28. Anatolios, *Athanasius* (2004), 7–8; Leithart, *Athanasius*, 2; R. Williams, "Origen," 132–42.
29. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 95–101.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

Given a clear understanding of the doctrine of creation from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), it became necessary to resolve ambiguities about the Son's ontological status in relation both to the Father and to creation. On what side of the divide does the Son stand? Is the Son Creator and eternal or a creature and created from nothing? Arius endorsed the latter, thus setting the terms of the controversy. He embraced Origen's subordinationism: the Son/Word is a creature—"There was a time when he was not." Athanasius endorsed the former: the Son is Creator, fully God, and thus always Son.

### *God and Creation*

Athanasius's theology belongs to the same theological tradition as Irenaeus's. Both closely connect creation and atonement.[30] The distinction between Creator and creature is fundamental. There is one God, who is Creator and Lord of everything that exists. God is self-existent, simple and immaterial, enclosing all things without being enclosed. He creates all contingent things from nothing. Created nature, because it is created from nothing, is finite, contingent, and subject to dissolution and a return to nonexistence.[31]

As with Irenaeus, the creation of the human being in the "image of God" plays a crucial role in Athanasius's theology.[32] His understanding of creation "from nothing" is central. God's motive for creation is love, and the radical dependency of creatures upon God's will for existence leads Athanasius to describe creation itself as a "mercy." He reads God's salvation of sinful humanity back into the original creation, thus emphasizing the continuity between creation and salvation.[33] Emphasizing creation's radical contingency, Athanasius speaks of the creation of humanity using the linguistic distinction between "nature" (φύσις, *physis*) and "grace" (χάρις, *charis*). "Nature" reflects the tendency of creation toward dissolution to "nothingness," while "grace" points to God's love and care for creation and is closely related to Athanasius's notion of participation. While all creation participates in existence, humanity as created in the "image of God" is granted a special "participation" in the "power of the Word," and is called to enter into this participation consciously and actively. Humanity is thus created to share consciously in the Word's own "rationality" and love (*C. Gent*. 41; *Inc*. 3).[34]

30. Anatolios, *Athanasius* (2004), 50.

31. Athanasius, *C. Gent*. 40–41 (*NPNF*[2] 4:25–26).

32. There are differences. E.g., Athanasius makes no distinction between the "image" and the "likeness" of God.

33. Athanasius, *Inc*. 3 (*NPNF*[2] 4:37–38).

34. Athanasius's distinction between "nature" and "grace" should not be confused with the later medieval distinction. See Anatolios, *Athanasius* (1998), 55–56, and Leithart, *Athanasius*, 100–116.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

For Athanasius, the fall into sin is related to the distinctive connection between humanity and embodiment. In creation, the human being is originally oriented toward union with God. In sin, however, the human being turns to that which is most immediately present—the body—embracing self-indulgence rather than transcendence. For Athanasius, idolatry is the classic portrayal of sin because it is an inversion of the human being's proper orientation to God.[35] The consequence of this fall into sin is that the human being is now drawn toward corruption and nothingness. Sin reverses the order of creation from "grace" toward "nature"—a process of "de-creation."[36] The human being is mortal by nature, having been made from nothing. Through the grace of and participation in the Word, humanity received incorruptible life, but the fall into sin introduced not only corruption but ultimately death (*Inc.* 4–5). Thus, the consequences of sin are not an extrinsic punishment but are logically intrinsic to sin's nature. If life and incorruption are the consequences of union with the Word, corruption and death are the inevitable consequences of the separation that results from sin.[37]

### *Incarnation and Salvation*

Athanasius's understanding of salvation coheres with his understanding of creation and the fall. If sin is a "de-creation," then salvation requires a "re-creation."[38] If the image of God in creation was a union with the divine Word leading to life and incorruption and the fall into sin is the loss of that union—leading to corruption and death—then atonement is a restoration of that lost union with a consequent restoration to incorruption and life.

The Son of God, who is by nature one with God, has become one with humanity in the incarnation so that the humanity of Christ, which is not proper to the Word by nature, has graciously become the "proper" humanity of the Word for our salvation. Through our union with the humanity of the incarnate Word, we who are human by nature (and not divine) have come to share by participation in the divine nature of the Word. There is thus a "rhetoric of reversal," as the God who is our "maker" by nature, and essentially Father of the eternal Word, becomes our Father by grace as the maker of the incarnate Word. "For by partaking of Him, we partake of the Father; because the Word is the Father's own."[39]

35. Anatolios, *Athanasius* (2004), 45, 48. This is a central theme of the *Contra Gentes*.
36. Anatolios, *Athanasius* (1998), 53–67; Anatolios, *Athanasius* (2004), 40–48.
37. Anatolios, *Athanasius* (2004), 48.
38. Anatolios, *Athanasius* (2004), 51.
39. Athanasius, *Syn.* 51 (*NPNF*$^2$ 4:477–78); Anatolios, *Athanasius* (1998), 129, 134, 146.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

The incarnation manifests the same attributes of divine strength and love as were involved in creation. As the fall into sin is itself a "descent" into corruption and death, the incarnation is a descent culminating in Christ's death, an act of loving divine solidarity with human lowliness that leads to a reversal of human fallenness, and a restoration to life and incorruptibility through the resurrection.[40] As Athanasius says in the best-known statement of his theology: "He was made man that we might be made God" (*Inc.* 54).

Athanasius's two-volume work *Against the Pagans/On the Incarnation* is an apologetic focused on the issue of the "scandal of the cross."[41] Throughout the work, Athanasius argues for the "fittingness" of atonement through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ (*Inc.* 22, 26). According to Athanasius, the entire purpose of the incarnation was so that Jesus Christ might die to save the fallen human race (4, 21). In a manner that anticipated Anselm of Canterbury's *Why God Became Man* (*Cur Deus Homo*), Athanasius suggested that the fall of humanity created a divine dilemma. On the one hand, it would have been "unworthy" of the goodness of God and "unfitting" for God to allow his work to be undone and for humanity to continue on the path of sin and corruption.[42] On the other hand, God could not go back on his word that death would follow from sin. If the only problem was the transgression of a command, then human repentance might have been sufficient. But repentance could neither restore humanity from a state of corruption nor restore the grace of its creation in the image of God. Only God's Word, through whom God had made all things from nothing, could restore corruption to incorruption (*Inc.* 7). Moreover, since the Word is the original image of God, it was appropriate that the Word should restore the corrupted image in humanity (13). Although the Word had been present in the original creation, he now entered the world in a new way: "He took pity on our race, and had mercy on our infirmity, and condescended to our corruption, and, unable to bear that death should have the mastery—lest the creature should perish, and His Father's handiwork in men be spent for nought—He takes unto Himself a body, and that of no different sort from ours" (8).

The incarnation of God in Christ is thus a *re-creation*: the original Word who brought humanity into existence entered his own creation by himself becoming a human being, taking on a human body. As sin came into existence because human beings abandoned transcendence and turned to created realities, thus sinning through embodiment, so the Word brought salvation

40. Anatolios, *Athanasius* (2004), 51.
41. Anatolios, *Athanasius* (1998), 67.
42. Leithart, *Athanasius*, 189n6.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

through embodiment, using his body as an "instrument" to be present to fallen humanity (*Inc.* 8, 17, 44). The Word, who by nature does not have a body "proper" to his deity, took on a body, which became "proper" to him as human,[43] in order to enable embodied sinners to perceive their Creator through a body: "To this end the loving and general Saviour of all, the Word of God, takes to Himself a body, and as Man walks among men and meets the senses of all men half-way, to the end, I say, that they who think that God is corporeal may from what the Lord effects by His body perceive the truth, and through Him recognize the Father" (15).

### *Atonement*

The rationale for Athanasius's concern with Christology is thus entirely soteriological. Athanasius is concerned about who Jesus is because of what it means for our salvation. Everything that the Word does, he does "for us." In the incarnation, God humbles himself so that we might be elevated (*C. Ar.* 1.40; 3.51, 52).[44] Athanasius's understanding parallels the incarnational model already seen in Irenaeus.

A key theme of Athanasius's understanding of atonement is that God did not bring about salvation through mere external command but rather through an intrinsic transformation from "within" the human being. God brought into being from nothing a creation external to himself, but the corruption brought into being through sin was something internal to the human being. It was therefore "fitting" or appropriate for God to bring about salvation from "within," by the Word becoming human and effecting salvation from the "inside," as it were (*Inc.* 43–44).[45]

This notion of atonement as an "inside job" appears in Athanasius's account of one of the two main purposes of the incarnation: Christ as teacher (*Inc.* 14). Athanasius states that God had provided four ways in which humanity could be taught about God. First, through being created in the image of God, human beings are made to know and love God. Second, after humanity had fallen, God could still be perceived through creation. Third, God sent the law and the prophets of the Old Testament so that humanity could have instruction "near at hand." However, fourth, when even this proved insufficient, the Word became incarnate, coming down to our own level and meeting us "half-way" (15).

43. Athanasius, *C. Ar.* 3.34 (*NPNF*$^{2}$ 4:412–13).

44. Leithart, *Athanasius*, 134, 153.

45. Anatolios, *Athanasius* (2004), 64; Anatolios, *Athanasius* (1998), 130; Leithart, *Athanasius*, 115; Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 99.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

However, it is not only Jesus's teaching that reveals God. Since the incarnate Christ is the Word through whom creation was made, God is also revealed in his works. As the visible Word of God, he makes the invisible Creator known. Through his body, we can perceive the mind of the invisible Father. Through his death, immortality is known. Through his humiliation, he healed our suffering (*Inc.* 54).[46] Athanasius thus anticipates a central theme of later so-called "exemplarist" or "moral influence" theories of the atonement: Christ in his incarnate person reveals God. However, this revelation of God was only part of the reason for the Word's incarnation. The primary reason was salvation obtained through the cross.

Athanasius's discussion of atonement includes the following themes, which appear repeatedly. First, as noted above, creation and atonement are closely connected. The atonement is a divine act of re-creation. Because the Word is the original image of God in whose image humanity was created, the incarnate Word is able to restore the image corrupted through sin (*Inc.* 13).

Second, this re-creation takes place through the union of the Word with humanity. In the incarnation, the Word takes on a human nature in order to restore it. Athanasius repeatedly describes the Word as assuming a nature like our own: "And thus He, the incorruptible Son of God, being conjoined with all by a like nature . . ." (*Inc.* 9); "The body, then, as sharing the same nature with all, for it was a human body, though by an unparalleled miracle it was formed of a virgin only, yet being mortal . . ." (20).

Third, sin, death, and corruption are closely connected. Although the Word is incorruptible in himself, by taking on a human body capable of death and dying on a cross, the Word is able to reverse the process of corruption and death (*Inc.* 13; cf. 8, 9, 10, 20, 21).

Fourth, neither the incarnation alone nor death on a cross alone effects atonement. Further, Athanasius never discusses the cross without mentioning resurrection in the same context. The incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus taken together as a whole accomplish atonement. The incarnation of Jesus was necessary in order that Jesus might restore humanity in the divine image. On the cross, Jesus took on himself the death that was the consequence of sin. However, the resurrection reverses the process of death and corruption, resulting in new life and incorruptibility. While at some points Athanasius states that the purpose of the incarnation was that Christ might die, at others he states that it was the resurrection (*Inc.* 8, 22).

There is, then, an atoning "exchange" of relations because of the incarnation: those characteristics that belong to the Word now belong to fallen and

46. Anatolios, *Athanasius* (1998), 37.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

restored humanity, and those characteristics that belong to sinful humanity become the possession of the incarnate Word. The immortal Word, who cannot die, underwent our death on the cross. Through the incorruption of his eternal life as the divine Word, he restores perishing humanity to incorruption. Through his death, he abolishes human death, and through their union with his human nature, those who were clothed with corruption receive the promise of resurrection (*Inc.* 9; *Ep. fest.* 108.).[47] This twofold predication will later be referred to as the *communicatio idiomatum* (communication of idioms), affirmed by Cyril of Alexandria against Nestorius of Antioch. Because the single identity of the person of the Son of God exists as human, properties of either his divine or human nature can be predicated of his divine person because his person is the subject of predication.

Thus, Athanasius most consistently talks about the atonement as the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of the incarnate Word reversing the process of corruption and death and restoring fallen humanity to the image of God. However, he also uses other themes and metaphors.

Athanasius understands the incarnation as taking place "for us" and uses images and language of representation, vicariousness, and perhaps even substitution. Thus, he speaks of Christ giving his body to death in place of or "in the stead" of all (*Inc.* 8). He says that Christ came to accomplish not his own death but the death of all (22), that he "suffered for our sakes" to "bear the curse" laid upon us (25).

Athanasius also speaks of Jesus's death as the paying of a debt and a ransom (*Inc.* 9, 20, 25). To whom was the debt or ransom paid? Athanasius does not specify, but the context indicates that he does not understand this to be a personal debt paid either to God or to Satan. Rather, the expression seems to be metaphorical.

Athanasius occasionally uses liturgical language of offering and sacrifice. It was "in order to [offer] sacrifice for bodies such as His own that the Word Himself also assumed a body. . . . For by the sacrifice of His own body, He both put an end to the law which was against us, and made a new beginning of life for us" (*Inc.* 10). Athanasius refers to Jesus's "sacrifice on behalf of all" and his "offering his body to death and raising it again" (16). The reader might wish that Athanasius had said more about how Christ's death functioned as a sacrifice, but he does not provide any detailed explanation.[48]

Athanasius also uses the language of Christus Victor seen in Irenaeus: the Lord came to "cast down the devil, and clear the air and prepare the way for

47. Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 96.
48. Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 34.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

us up into heaven" (*Inc.* 25). Such passages occur rarely and in the context of discussion of New Testament citations that mention Satan. Unlike other church fathers, Athanasius did not write at length about atonement in terms of the overthrow of Satan.

### *The Holy Spirit and Deification*

The Holy Spirit is key to Athanasius's theology because it is the Spirit who unites Christians to the Father and the Son.[49] Against tendencies to identify the Spirit as a creature, Athanasius insists that the Holy Spirit is fully God and uses similar arguments as he had used when discussing the divinity of the Son (*Serap.* 1.2; *C. Ar.* 1.18; 3.24, 25).[50]

The anointing of Jesus with the Holy Spirit at his baptism plays a crucial role in the economy of salvation. At Jesus's baptism, the Holy Spirit anoints the incarnate Son, not for his sake but for ours, that we might share in his anointing. After his resurrection, Jesus sanctifies his disciples by baptizing them in the Holy Spirit (*C. Ar.* 1.47–48; 2.61; 3.24).[51]

Athanasius uses the word *theopoiēsis*, or "deification" (*theōsis*), for this process of sanctification that takes place through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (*C. Ar.* 1.38). Deification is not a matter of blurring the distinction between Creator and creature, or the difference between being the Son of God by nature and sharing in divine adoption through grace.[52] Rather, deification is concerned above all with incorporation or union. Because Christians share in Jesus's death and resurrection, they also share in his exaltation. Through being united to Christ's risen body, we become one body with him and are thus united to the Father as well (1.38, 43, 44, 45; 3.22).

Communion with the risen Christ takes place through the Holy Spirit, whom Christ pours out on his church (*C. Ar.* 2.14, 18). As the Son is Son by nature, so Christians, being united to the Son through the grace of the Holy Spirit, become children of God through participation (3.24). As was the case with Irenaeus, sacraments are crucial to Athanasius's theology of deification. In Jesus's baptism he was sanctified with the Holy Spirit, and we have been baptized in him (1.48). In our own baptism, we are baptized into the entire Trinity. Whoever the Father baptizes, the Son also baptizes, and the Son consecrates those who are baptized in the Holy Spirit (2.41).[53]

49. Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 107.
50. Leithart, *Athanasius*, 79; Weinandy, *Athanasius* 105, 108.
51. Leithart, *Athanasius*, 158–59; Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 99, 106.
52. Leithart, *Athanasius*, 159.
53. Leithart, *Athanasius*, 160–64; Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 99–100.

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

Deification means, then, that human beings have been brought into the communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit by the incarnation of the Son through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Through union with Christ's risen humanity, Christians are transformed into his likeness as he restores the image of God, and we come to share in the divine life of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is the bond who unites Christians to Christ's risen humanity.

### *Concluding Reflections on Athanasius*

Athanasius's theology of atonement is very much in the same tradition as Irenaeus's. Atonement is so closely integrated with his theology of the Trinity, creation and fall, and the incarnation and grace that it is only possible to discuss it in the context of the whole. Atonement is restoration of a fallen creation and union with the incarnate Word through whom humanity was created in his image. Athanasius's theology of atonement is Christocentric. On the one hand, the deity of Jesus Christ is central to salvation because only God can save. On the other hand, the incarnate Word is human because sinful human beings are the ones who need to be saved. Atonement is thus a divine act in which the single subject of the Word assumed a human nature in order that, by undergoing death himself and overcoming it in bodily resurrection, he might overcome the death and corruption introduced by sin. Salvation means being united to the humanity of the incarnate Word Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection, reversing the process of corruption and death, and sharing in the eternal communion of the Trinity, which results in incorruption and life.

In contrast to Irenaeus, Athanasius focuses specifically on the cross and resurrection as the center of atonement. The purpose of the incarnation was so that Jesus Christ could die "for us." Athanasius describes Christ as acting vicariously in our place and thus comes closer than Irenaeus to the language of substitution. However, as with Irenaeus, there is no hint that Jesus was punished in our place on the cross or that the atonement satisfied divine justice or wrath. Athanasius speaks of atonement not in terms of the law court but in terms of rescue and re-creation.

At the same time, Athanasius's focus on the cross and resurrection raises the question of whether he had anything like Irenaeus's historically oriented understanding of "recapitulation." For Athanasius, the primary purpose for the incarnation was that Jesus might die on the cross, but it seems that the purpose of his preceding earthly life was mainly noetic—to reveal God through his teaching and deeds.

Nonetheless, what Athanasius says about Jesus's anointing with the Holy Spirit at his baptism indicates that he did understand Jesus's entire human

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

experience to be of soteriological significance. It was because Jesus was himself sanctified with the Spirit that he is able to sanctify others. This communication of life and holiness (deification) is crucial to Athanasius's soteriology. Because the Word who is the image of God has become flesh, he is able to restore the image of God to fallen human beings, to overcome their corruption and death by his own death and resurrection, and, by baptizing with the Spirit those who have faith in him, to unite them to his own risen humanity and bring them into communion with the triune God. If Athanasius does not speak at length about recapitulation, what he says about the significance of Jesus's anointing with the Holy Spirit strongly implies something like it.

### *Looking Forward*

The atonement theologies of Irenaeus and Athanasius introduce a number of significant themes that set the stage for later discussions and provide criteria by which later theologies can be measured.

1. Economic-immanent correlation: While the immanent Trinity has an ontological priority over the economic Trinity, the economic Trinity—God revealed in history as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is a true revelation of God's inner being. Accordingly, atonement is grounded in the nature of the triune God.
2. Person-work correlation: It is because Jesus Christ is the Second Person of the Trinity, fully God, that he is able to save humanity. Yet it is also because Jesus Christ is fully human that he is able to save humanity. The saving work of Jesus Christ in the history of salvation is thus closely related to his personal ontology. The Chalcedonian formula that Jesus Christ is a single divine person, with two complete natures—one divine and one human—provides the ontological presupposition of atonement theology.
3. Life-death correlation: Although atonement theology has the suffering and death of Jesus at its center—"Jesus died for our sins"—his atoning work includes and must be related to his entire earthly mission: incarnation, ministry (teaching, healing, and miracles), crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and second coming (when he will reign as Lord).
4. Exemplarism (ontological and teleological): Jesus Christ is the exemplar of humanity, but not merely in the sense that he is the primary moral example of how human beings should live. He is the archetypal human being who is the primary model for the entire human race, the "second Adam" in whose image other human beings are created and through

William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, Mapping Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.