

Kingdom Reductionism: A critique of Neo-Anabaptist historiography surrounding the framing of patristic atonement theory after Gustaf Aulén.

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Neo-Anabaptist and other similar churches that advocate pacifism and social justice often struggle with traditional portrayals of the atonement. Views that portray the need for violence to bring about the salvation of the world are understandably troublesome to Anabaptist sympathies. In particular, the traditional portrayal of penal substitutionary atonement (PSA), where Jesus is described as receiving the punishment of God intended for sinners, is repugnant to most modern writers of Neo-Anabaptist thought. In developing a robust soteriology that reflects the nonviolent convictions so central to the Anabaptist hermeneutic, Neo-Anabaptists have embraced what has been called a “nonviolent atonement.”¹ Considering the Anabaptist commitment to nonresistance and social justice, this attraction is understandable. Tethered to this nonviolent hermeneutic, however, is an identification with the primitive church. Close to heart of Anabaptist thought is a perceived identity to the persecuted church that lived before the Constantinian synthesis of the fourth century. Since the birth of the movement in the 16th century, down to the blogs and conference halls of the iconoclasts and radicals of today, patristic historiography has played an epistemological significance in the development of the Anabaptist hermeneutic.² Attempts to connect this patristic identity with Anabaptist soteriology have often generated faith expressions that fall outside of the norm.

Debate over patristic atonement theory is nothing new. At least since the Middle Ages, gifted writers such as Peter Abelard have reframed and scrutinized the patristic accounts of the atonement. In the twentieth century, a significant challenge to patristic atonement theory occurred in response to the book *Christus Victor*, written by Gustaf Aulén. In his book, Aulén presents a cleverly written revisionist history of atonement theory. Aulén’s thesis repudiates the idea that penal substitutionary atonement played any significant part of the patristic thought or literature of the early church, especially among the Greek fathers. Significant to this study, Aulén presented a historiography of patristic atonement theory that he described as nonviolent or “benevolent.”³ Aulén presented this patristic historiography in sharp contrast to what he saw as the violent metaphors found in later theories of the middle ages, created by men such as Anselm of Canterbury. Stemming from an intuition to root their epistemology in a nonviolent patristic historiography, Anabaptist writers followed the lead of Gustaf Aulén with tenacity. Progressing through the twentieth century, Neo-Anabaptists worked out their soteriology incorporating “nonviolent” atonement models with a historiography identical or at least very similar to that of Aulén. The vocabulary surrounding the rejection of PSA grew over the 20th century, starting from suspicion in the 1950s, and growing to include labels such as “divine child abuse⁴” by the end of the century. Significant to this study, every major work done in defense of a “nonviolent” atonement theory did so by incorporating an epistemology that leaned heavily on a patristic historiography similar to that presented by Gustaf Aulén. It is this

¹ J. Denny Weaver popularized the phrase in his book, J. Denny Weaver. *The Nonviolent Atonement*, Second Edition *The Nonviolent Atonement*.

² David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Martyrs Mirror: A Social History*, Illustrated edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

³ Gustaf Aulén and A. G Hebert, *Christus Victor; an Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 92.

⁴ Although not original to him, J. Denny Weaver popularized the phrase “divine child abuse” in his book, *The Nonviolent Atonement*.

historiography surrounding the framing of patristic atonement theory that this paper will challenge.

This paper acknowledges the tension that PSA causes in the Neo-Anabaptist nonviolent paradigm. It is beyond the scope of this paper to work out a systematic theology needed to recover PSA back into the nomenclature of Neo-Anabaptist soteriology. The aim of this study is to challenge the claim that penal substitutionary atonement did not exist in the early Church. This paper will argue that the evidence needed to present non-violent/*Christus Victor* atonement theories as the exclusive or even normative “patristic” view of the atonement is remarkably unfounded. Furthermore, this paper will attempt to demonstrate that PSA and other “sacrificial” or “violent” metaphors appear in the patristic literature as much or more than the nonviolent/*Christus Victor* metaphors.

Definitions

The doctrine of the atonement is one of the fundamental teachings of Christianity. The Apostle Paul speaks of the Atonement in 1 Corinthians saying, “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved . . . that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.”⁵ The truth that “Christ died for our sins” is a fact in which all Christians agree. But how Jesus accomplished this salvation that Paul spoke of has been debated for centuries. Put simply, the doctrine of the atonement asks the “why” and “how” questions surrounding our salvation, such as, “Why did Jesus become man?” and, “How does His death accomplish the salvation of humanity?” Because this study deals with nuances of thought, to avoid confusion, some basic definitions should be given. Although doctrines of the atonement can certainly be broken into several more detailed parts, this study will focus on just two categories: penal substitutionary atonement and *Christus Victor*.

Penal Substitutionary Atonement

Definitions of PSA vary between denominations and writers, but most share a few common ideas.⁶ PSA frequently incorporates images of Old Testament animal sacrifice as metaphors for the work of Christ on the cross. It will occasionally, but not always, portray God as angry against sinners and a sinful world. Words such as “guilt,” “curse,” and “punishment” are commonly used. Jarvis J. Williams⁷ defines the PSA model as,

Jesus died a violent, substitutionary death to be a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of Jews and Gentiles. By this death, Jesus took upon himself God’s righteous judgment and wrath against the sins of those for whom he died. By dying as their penal substitute, Jesus paid the penalty for their sins, and he therefore both propitiated God’s wrath against their sins and expiated their sins so that the sins of Jews and Gentiles would be forgiven and so that they would be justified by faith, forgiven of their sins, reconciled to God, reconciled to each other, participate in the future resurrection, and saved from God’s wrath.⁸

⁵ See 1 Corinthians 15:1-8

⁶ For example, J. I. Packer said, “penal substitution is just one type of substitution.” said in, “*What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution*,” in *The J. I. Packer Collection* (ed. Alister McGrath; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), pp. 109-11. See Baker, Mark D.; Green, Joel B. *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (p. 166). InterVarsity Press.

⁷ Jarvis J. Williams is associate professor of New Testament Interpretation at Southern Seminary.

⁸ <https://www.9marks.org/article/what-is-penal-substitution/>

Christus Victor

In the *Christus Victor* model there is much more emphasis on the ethical teachings of Jesus. A particular distinction to CV that is often mentioned includes an emphasis on the incarnation and resurrection of Christ. This particular aspect of CV is called “recapitulation.” In this idea God recapitulated, or rather, “restarted” humanity in the incarnation of Christ. This new humanity in Christ culminated with a final victory over Satan through His resurrection.⁹ Hence the name, “*Christus Victor*” or victory of Christ. J. Denny Weaver, in his book *The Nonviolent Atonement* defines *Christus Victor* as,

This atonement image used the image of cosmic battle between good and evil, between the forces of God and those of Satan. In that fray God's son Jesus Christ was killed, an apparent defeat of God and victory by Satan. However, Jesus' resurrection turned the seeming defeat into a great victory, which forever revealed God's control of the universe and freed sinful humans from the power of sin and Satan. This motif carries the designation of "classic" because it is the prevailing view found in early church theologians.¹⁰ A variation of the classic or victory motif depicted Christ's death as the ransom price paid to Satan in exchange for freeing the sinners Satan held captive. With his resurrection, Christ then escaped the clutches of Satan, and sinners were freed from Satan's power.¹¹

Historic Anabaptist atonement theory before Gustaf Aulén

Similar to the writings of the early Christians, 16th century Anabaptists were often writing from a setting of persecution and hardship. Nevertheless, considering the circumstances, there exists a remarkable amount of literature for this early time period. Fortunately, salvation and atonement doctrines were topics that surfaced in their literature. Throughout this literature, no one exclusive model of the atonement dominates. Like the early Christians, Anabaptists incorporated a variety of different models and metaphors. Similar to themes found in *Christus Victor*, the emphasis for the early Anabaptist was more focused on life than on doctrine. This is not to say that they were indifferent about theology. Indeed, at times they risked their lives over small nuances of the faith. However, where the early Anabaptist’s soteriology differed from that of the Magisterial Reformers was where the theology stopped. The Anabaptists were not satisfied with a theology that did not result in a changed life. Because of their practical emphasis on life, often presented as victory over the devil, many *Christus Victor* themes can be found in their writings.¹²

Focusing on these passages, it can be tempting to collapse their theology into a form of Pelagian moralism. To do so, however, is to miss an important aspect of their theology. A careful reading of their literature reveals that while their emphasis was certainly on a practical outworking of the faith, their theology at times sounded surprisingly “Reformed.” Thomas N. Finger author of *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology* says, “Historic Anabaptist views cannot be simplistically identified with traditional models. Some

⁹ Moral influence theory is yet another nuance of *Christus Victor* that describes Jesus’ work on the cross as an ultimate example of God’s love to influence mankind to love God and obey Him.

¹⁰ Notice Weaver’s confidence that this is the view of the early church. It is this point that this current study will challenge.

¹¹ J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement, Second Edition*, Second Edition, New (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2011), 15.

¹² For Example, see Pilgrim Marpeck, *Writings of Pilgrim Marpeck*, pp. 121-24. Or, Philips, *Writings of Dirk Philips*, p. 146.

Anabaptist expressions, however, were clearly substitutionary. Most Anabaptists thought that Jesus' death at least cancelled the judgment that sins deserve."¹³

To the early Anabaptists, much of the sound of the Reformers' message on subjects such as faith, grace, and salvation appealed to their ears. Where they sharply differed was in application. The Anabaptists had a settled expectation that the Christ who saved them would also empower them to live a holy life. Furthermore, through this theology of *Nachfolge Christi* (practical following of Christ) they understood that Christ would build His kingdom on earth through them.¹⁴ This combination of a grace filled soteriology, fused with an ethical Jesus-following anthropology, gave the early Anabaptists a unique emphasis.

A notable example of this synthesis can be seen in 1538, when an Anabaptist leader, speaking on behalf of his group, was called to a colloquy in Berne, Switzerland. His audience was with the leaders of the Reformed Church. Addressing them, the Anabaptist leader said,

While yet in the national church, we obtained much instruction from the writings of Luther, Zwingli, and others, concerning the mass and other papal ceremonies, that they are vain. Yet we recognized a great lack as regards repentance, conversion, and the true Christian life. Upon these things my mind was bent.... No beginning was made toward true Christian living... Then God sent His messengers, Conrad Grebel and others, with whom I conferred about the fundamental teachings of the apostles and the Christian life and practice. I found them men who had surrendered themselves to the doctrine of Christ by "*Bussfertigkeit*" [repentance evidenced by fruits]. With their assistance we established a congregation in which repentance was in evidence by newness of life in Christ.¹⁵

In similar fashion, Frances F. Hiebert, in the article *The Atonement in Anabaptist Theology*¹⁶ brings attention to another of these early debates. Quoting a work by the 16th century Reformer, Martin Bucer, Hiebert tells of a debate that Bucer had with the Anabaptists. In this debate Bucer exonerated Michael Sattler because he agreed with Bucer that, "the death of Christ was a propitiatory sacrifice offered to God to cover the sins of humanity." Combining both the ethical demands of a "Kingdom now" theology found in Christus Victor, with the devotional and metaphysical aspects of PSA, gave the early Anabaptists a soteriology that is hard to reduce to a single model.

Through the centuries there were times when differences over the atonement played a more prominent role in church conflicts. For example, in 1660 disputes over the doctrine of the atonement were one of the theological challenges that led to the historic split of the *Singelkerk* congregation in Holland. Consisting of 2,000 members at the time, the split was significant. The newspaper called the division the "War of the Lambs."¹⁷ Moving up to modern times, Finger says that up until the 19th and early 20th century, PSA themes were common. However, since the 1940s, the soteriology in Anabaptist literature has moved away from PSA.¹⁸

¹³ Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive*, Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2004), 562.

¹⁴ Robert Friedmann, *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries: Its Genius and Its Literature*, 0 edition (Eugene, Ore.; Scottsdale Pa.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1999), 8.

¹⁵ Harold Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision*, ed. CrossReach Publications (Independently published, 2017), 15.

¹⁶ Hiebert, Frances F, *Direction: The Atonement in Anabaptist Theology*. Accessed April 20, 2021. <https://directionjournal.org/30/2/atonement-in-anabaptist-theology.html#Note57>.

¹⁷ [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Galenus_Abrahamsz_de_Haan_\(1622-1706\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Galenus_Abrahamsz_de_Haan_(1622-1706))

¹⁸ Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, 350. See the quotes at the end of this paper by John D Roth. Also see his discussion on this multi view in his book, and discussion by John D Roth in, *Beliefs, Mennonite Faith and Practice* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 2005), 73.

Kingdom Theology: More than just the Anabaptists

“Kingdom theology”¹⁹ is a phrase used by theologians today that advocates for incorporating Jesus’ social, ethical, and ecclesial teachings back into the Gospel message. Kingdom theology often emphasizes Jesus’ ethical or practical teachings, contending that the Gospel message presented by modern evangelicalism has focused too much on personal salvation, thereby missing Jesus’ “kingdom message.” Writers such as George Eldon Ladd, in his book, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*,²⁰ Richard Stearns’ *The Hole in Our Gospel*, or N.T. Wright’s *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*,²¹ are just a few of the diverse group of Evangelicals now popularizing these kingdom views. Common to these teachers is an attempt to correct the hyper-dispensationalism of the twentieth century, particularly where the ethics and teachings of Jesus were removed from the Gospel message. In short, these new writers argued that the Kingdom of God preached by Jesus should be lived out practically in the church in a “now/not yet” dynamic. Charmed by the sound of social justice, community building, peacemaking, and radical discipleship, this nonviolent kingdom theology has gathered in groups as diverse as feminists, Marxists, liberation theologians, emerging church advocates, as well as the Neo-Anabaptists.

Reading the Bible from the perspective of kingdom theology is eye opening for many. Books from the kingdom theology camp frequently publish testimonies of people who speak of a paradigm shift as an awakening.²² I call this paradigm shift a “kingdom epiphany.” In this epiphany, Jesus’ concern for the poor, nonresistance, and Sermon on the Mount teachings take on a new light and emphasis. Following this kingdom epiphany, it is natural for Neo-Anabaptists and kingdom theologians to question things such as the atrocities of war, slavery, and injustice done in the name of Christ throughout the centuries. Grasping for a *telos* that would account for the radical departure of the church from the simple words of Jesus, the early church is often looked to as a model. Because of this, the rediscovery of the *Christus Victor* model of the atonement in early Christianity has received much attention from this group. However, blinded by the light of their Kingdom epiphany, many Neo-Anabaptist have overreacted to this discovery and discarded the more traditional models of the atonement in the shadows of this new light.

As children of the Radical Reformation, Anabaptists typically confront theology in a “restoration” rather the “reformation” mindset. Restoring Christianity to the simplicity of the early church is the *raison d’être* in much of Anabaptist ecclesiology and theology. Because of this desire to identify with the ancient church, the place of historical theology weighs heavily in the Anabaptist hermeneutic. For this reason, the framing of patristic atonement theory is significant. Arguments that claim their view of the atonement is “nonviolent” and “patristic” find fertile ground in kingdom/Anabaptist circles.

Gustaf Aulén

Coming into the 20th century, traditional ideas of atonement theory were being challenged. For the Anabaptists, one work in particular by Gustaf Aulén entitled *Christus Victor* left an influence on the doctrine of the atonement like none other. Similar to the way

¹⁹ Dallis Willard, Scot McKnight, NT Wright as well as Dallis Willard, Scot McKnight, Brian D. McLaren

²⁰ George Eldon Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God*, Later Printing. edition (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1990). Also see his book, George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1996).

²¹ N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*, Reprint edition (HarperOne, 2012).

²² Two examples with completely different outcomes would be, Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything* or David Bercot, *Kingdom That Turned the World Upside Down*.

Thomas Paine's little political tract entitled *Common Sense* eclipsed the influence of the political scientists of his day, Gustaf Aulén's less than 100 pages of *Christus Victor* has influenced a century of historical theology. The influence this book has had on Neo-Anabaptist/kingdom theology and liberal Evangelical thought is incontestable. From J. Denny Weaver to N.T. Wright, most writers mention *Christus Victor* in their theology explicitly. Even if not mentioned by name, Aulén's patristic historiography has dominated scholarship in Anabaptist and kingdom theological circles. Because of this influence, Aulén's framing of the patristic record should be explored in detail.

Between March and September of 1930, Gustaf Aulén, a professor of systematic theology from the University of Lund, delivered a series of lectures in universities in Sweden and Germany in which he presented what he called the "*Christus Victor*" view of the atonement. A year later, an Anglican monk of the Society of the Sacred Mission named A.G. Hebert translated these lectures and published them into a book under the title *Christus Victor an Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*. A.G. Hebert, a liturgical scholar, not only translated the lectures but wrote the forward to the book.

Curiously, from the beginning of the book, Hebert focused a significant amount of attention to framing Aulén's motives for writing the book. Hebert said, "This book is strictly an historical study; it contains no personal statement of belief or theory of the Atonement."²³ This remark at the beginning of the book is notable because Aulén, like himself, was not specifically a historian. Nevertheless, this work was endeavoring to reframe the patristic historiography surrounding the atonement in terms not used before. With near impudence, Hebert introduces Aulén's thesis with little regard to the standard passive language found among academic writing saying, "As soon as the meaning of this view is grasped, the patristic teaching at once stands out as a strong, clear, and consistent whole, and it becomes impossible to doubt that it is this view which also dominates the New Testament; it has therefore every right to be called the typical Christian view, or, in Dr. Aulén's phrase, the 'classic' idea of the Atonement."²⁴

Simply put, Aulén described his model as the Biblical and early Christian view of the atonement. Specifically, Aulén defined *Christus Victor* atonement as the "victory over the powers which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death, and the devil."²⁵ Intentionally different than what Aulén saw as "violent" metaphors found in PSA, *Christus Victor* atonement emphasized salvation through the defeat of Satan and his kingdom. Quoting the early church, Aulén rescued these "kingdom" ideas that were being neglected in the early 20th century. At the beginning of his lectures, Aulén distinguished *Christus Victor* atonement from penal substitutionary atonement (PSA) labeling PSA as "Latin" and *Christus Victor* as "Classic" or "patristic." Framing this "classic" view Aulén said,

The classic idea has in reality held a place in the history of Christian doctrine whose importance it would not be easy to exaggerate. Though it is expressed in a variety of forms, not all of which are equally fruitful, there can be no dispute that it is the dominant idea of the Atonement throughout the early church period...It was, in fact, the ruling idea of the Atonement for the first thousand years of Christian history.²⁶

It is extraordinary that a theological topic as nuanced as the atonement could be presented in an academic audience with such dogmatic boldness. Explaining how *Christus Victor* (CV) atonement was lost through the centuries, Aulén claimed that CV went on the decline after Constantine and eventually was "ousted" in the Middle ages due to ecclesial and societal attitudes. Once again buttressing his view with uncommon confidence, Aulén disarms

²³ Aulén and Hebert, *Christus Victor; an Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, 7.

²⁴ Aulén and Hebert, 7.

²⁵ Aulén and Hebert, 20.

²⁶ Aulén and Hebert, 15.

opposing interpretation of the patristic account stating, “any account of the history of the doctrine which does not give full consideration to this type of view cannot fail to be seriously misleading.”²⁷

From these challenging introductory remarks, Aulén went on to describe the “Recapitulation” theology of Irenaeus bringing out Irenaeus’ emphasis on the Incarnation. Only a few sentences of Irenaeus are actually cited, but Aulén does a masterful job of capturing the thought of Irenaeus surrounding the significance of the Incarnation as a redemptive theme to explain the atonement. Aulén said, “Let us, then, put the question again: For what purpose did Christ come down from heaven?” He then lets Irenaeus answer, “That He might destroy sin, overcome death, and give life to man.”²⁸ Following this, Aulén turns to a larger passage of Irenaeus that he feels encapsulates all of early Christian thought on the atonement.

“Man had been created by God that he might have life. If now, having lost life, and having been harmed by the serpent, he were not to return to life, but were to be wholly abandoned to death, then God would have been defeated, and the malice of the serpent would have overcome God’s will. But since God is both invincible and magnanimous, He showed His magnanimity in correcting man, and in proving all men, as we have said; but through the Second Man He bound the strong one, and spoiled his goods, and annihilated death, bringing life to man who had become subject to death. For Adam had become the devil’s possession, and the devil held him under his power, by having wrongfully practiced deceit upon him, and by the offer of immortality made him subject to death. For by promising that they should be as gods, which did not lie in his power, he worked death in them. Wherefore he who had taken man captive was himself taken captive by God, and man who had been taken captive was set free from the bondage of condemnation.”²⁹

Irenaeus’ emphasis here on the power of Jesus over Satan and the liberation of souls from Satan’s bondage is remarkable. Aulén is right for pulling these atonement themes out of the shadows of early Christian thought. Where Aulén goes wrong is when he presents this view exclusively. For Aulén, a reading of both the New Testament and the early church is only correct if presented in this light. Like his translator, the length Aulén goes to convince his audience that his view is right is peculiar. For example, to ensure his readers that Irenaeus represents the entirety of patristic thinking, Aulén sums up the rest of the patristic witness saying, “The smaller writings of the Apostolic Fathers treat of this theme in a relatively incidental way, and the same is true of the extant works of the Apologists; though this does not at all imply that the subject itself was in any way of secondary importance for those writers.”³⁰ Just a few pages later, Aulén once again assures his readers that all of the early Christians shared his view saying,

It is not possible, in the rapid summary to which we are obliged to confine ourselves,

²⁷ Aulén and Hebert, 15.

²⁸ Aulén and Hebert, 22.

Note: As important as the emphasis that Irenaeus puts here in this passage on the incarnation and Christ victory over Satan, reading the full context paints a slightly different picture. Irenaeus is making an argument here for the incarnation against the gnostic ideas of *Docetism*. This is the false idea that Christ came only as a spirit and not in the flesh. Irenaeus is then providing several proofs as to why the Gnostic idea of *Docetism* is wrong. Therefore, it should be mentioned that while the *Christus Victor* ideas that flow from this passage are important, it should be cautioned that the twentieth century CV interpretation of this passage is being taken slightly out of context.

²⁹ Aulén and Hebert, 22–23.

³⁰ Aulén and Hebert, 21.

to treat all the Fathers as fully as we have treated Irenæus; nor is it necessary. In spite of all the diversities of the different Fathers, the general agreement between them on this subject is such that it is possible to treat them together in a single comprehensive statement... In fact, there are not different theories of the Atonement in the Fathers, but only variant expressions of one and the same basic idea.³¹

From these brief remarks from Irenaeus, Aulén lightly touches on the ransom view of the atonement. Here he points to Origen's teaching that Jesus won our salvation by paying a ransom to Satan.

Origen discusses to whom the ransom-price is paid, and directly denies that it can possibly be paid to God. "But to whom did He give His soul as a ransom for many? Surely not to God. Could it, then, be to the Evil One? For he had us in his power, until the ransom for us should be given to him, even the life (or soul) of Jesus, since he (the Evil One) had been deceived, and led to suppose that he was capable of mastering that soul, and he did not see that to hold Him involved a trial of strength (βάσανον) greater than he was equal to."^{32*}

Curiously, right after Aulén ensured his readers that Irenaeus and Origen's views were "the ruling view" of all patristic Christianity, Aulén provides no other Ante-Nicene writer to support his case. Instead, Aulén introduces two of the most prolific writers of the Ante-Nicene era, Tertullian and Cyprian. However, he quickly dismisses them both because they do not represent Aulén's "Classic" view. Instead of recognizing this as evidence that the early Christian view of the atonement is more nuanced than originally thought, Aulén explains that these two writers are simply outliers. The quote Aulén provided from the Tertullian was,

"To leave the penance unperformed, and yet expect forgiveness of sins! What is it but to fail to pay the price, and, nevertheless, to stretch out the hand for the benefit? The Lord has ordained that forgiveness is to be granted for this price: He wills that the remission of the penalty is to be purchased for the payment which penance makes."³³

Apparently, Tertullian's insistence here that forgiveness requires repentance bothered Aulén. He explains that this and a similar aberrant view by Cyprian stems from their legalistic "Latin" orientation. Curiously, Aulén concedes that their mistakes are the starting place for what Aulén called the "Latin" (PSA) view of the atonement.

Tertullian, whose teaching about Penance centers altogether round the satisfaction made by man for sin and the idea of merit, begins to quarry the stones for the future

³¹ Aulén and Hebert, 33.

³² Aulén and Hebert, 39.

*Note: The primary source to this quote is surprisingly hard to find. The classic Ante-Nicene Fathers series translated in the late 19th century contains a translation of only Books 10-14 of Origen's *Commentary of Matthew*. No reason was given why they stopped where they did. The quote is very important. It describes a view of the atonement developed later by Gregory of Nyssa in the 4th century. The quote is clear enough, and it seems reasonable that Origen did indeed say this. However, reading the context it seems that Origen was perhaps in one of his more speculative moods. Curiously, the context goes on to say that the payment that Jesus paid to Satan was only Jesus' soul, apart from his flesh and spirit. Origen reasons that Jesus' spirit was released to the Father and His flesh stayed on the cross. Therefore, only the soul of Jesus paid the ransom. There is a recent translation of the Origen's Greek text by Justin M. Gohl entitled, *Origen of Alexandria's Commentary on Matthew, Book 16 -- An English Translation*.

³³ Aulén and Hebert, 60.

edifice of the Latin theory, and that Cyprian first applies the ideas of Tertullian directly to the Atonement. After Cyprian, the Latin idea is to be found here and there in the Western Church, and increasingly as time goes on.³⁴

Aulén does not let these two significant Ante-Nicene writers alter his understanding of patristic Christianity at all. At the end of this chapter, Aulén once more ensures the readers that this view is the view held by the patristic giants including, “Origen, Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Chrysostom.”³⁵ Leaving the patristics, Aulén attempts to defend his thesis from the Biblical text. Aulén does well at identifying many of Paul’s neglected ransom and *Christus Victor* metaphors. Passages such as Col. 2:15 spring to life under the *Christus Victor* paradigm, “Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.” However, when Aulén attempts to collapse Paul’s “propitiation” and “sacrifice” themes into *Christus Victor* it seems forced.³⁶ As to all the passages filled with the sacrificial language of the Old Testament, Aulén dismisses them in a few sentences. Some of the most significant passages of the Old Testament, such as the Passover Lamb and the sacrifices of Leviticus are not even touched. Conspicuously, even Isaiah 53, with all its prophetic and sacrificial language about Christ is never mentioned in this chapter, nor any other place in the book.

Perhaps Aulén’s most influential section is his chapter on “The Middle Ages.” After repeatedly insisting that *Christus Victor* is the dominant view in the early church, Aulén goes on to make an argument for where PSA came from. Aulén points to Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century as the main instigator. He adds that later development was added by Thomas Aquinas.³⁷ Aulén’s framing of Anselm of Canterbury as the originator of PSA is one of the most repeated axioms of his book.

Following Aulén’s discussion on the Middle Ages, surprisingly, a large section of his book attempts to reframe Martin Luther’s soteriology as *Christus Victor* rather than the traditional portrayal of Luther as a champion of PSA. Wrapping up his arguments at the end of his short book, Aulén once again ensures his readers that his motives were strictly historical and presented without bias,

I have not had any intention of writing an apologia for the classic idea; and if my exposition has shaped itself into something like a vindication of it, I would plead that it is because the facts themselves point that way. For it can scarcely be denied that the classic idea emerged with Christianity itself, and on that ground alone cannot be refused a claim such as neither the Latin nor the subjective type of teaching can make, to embody that which is most genuinely Christian.³⁸

Gustaf Aulén’s work was a sensation. His treatment of the *Christus Victor* model of the atonement resurrected elements of the atonement that had been shamefully neglected during his time. As a result, Aulén won the affection of almost a century of notable

³⁴ Aulén and Hebert, 34.

³⁵ Aulén and Hebert, 33.

³⁶ Aulén dismisses Paul’s use of Christ sacrifice almost entirely. Where the language of sacrifice is too strong to dismiss, Aulén argues that Paul is merely describing Christ sacrifice in the language of personal sacrifice for a greater cause. See page 54 where Aulén says, “The Pauline use of the idea of Sacrifice lies wholly within the limits of the classic idea; note that, as Schmitz says, Paul uses sacrificial imagery as freely when he speaks of his own self-oblation as Christ’s apostle as when he speaks of Christ’s death.”

³⁷ See page 61-67 where Aulén said that while the punishment aspect of the PSA is not directly discussed in Anselm, it is implied and closely related to his other themes.

³⁸ Aulén and Hebert, *Christus Victor; an Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, 107.

adherents to his view, including the famed C.S. Lewis. Indeed, his patristic historiography resonated throughout the church in both academic and popular sectors.

However, as masterful as his work was in restoring some of the lost elements of the atonement, Aulén's historiography of the patristic view of the atonement was, as a whole, remarkably unfounded and reductionistic. As will be demonstrated in this study, despite Aulén's confidence that *Christus Victor* was the only significant theory driving patristic thought, a careful reading of the historical record paints a significantly different picture.

Kingdom Reductionism After Aulén

After the work of Aulén, the vision that resonated in the ears of the Anabaptists was said right in the book's introductory statement, "In other words, the satisfaction-theory... belong to the era of the church's 'captivity,' but the 'classic' view of redemption is at once truly evangelical and truly catholic."³⁹ This idea of a historiography that is free of 'captivity' stuck with the Anabaptists. Motivated by an understandable desire to distance kingdom theology from the mistakes of militant Christendom, Neo-Anabaptists fell prey to poor historical methods. Blinded by the light of their kingdom epiphany, it was easy for them to miss contrary views when reading the patristics, particularly when they sounded like the shibboleths of their enemies.

Recently, some leading *Christus Victor* Evangelicals have begun to recognize a broader view in atonement models. A remarkable example of this is seen in a video interview with long-time *Christus Victor* advocate, N.T. Wright. In this interview the host asked the question if Wright's view of the Atonement could be called "*Christus Victor*." Wright said yes, but then he quickly added,

The problem with that is that in the 50s or 60s there was a famous book on '*Christus Victor*' which played it off against the other theories. And it was that book by a Swedish bishop called Gustav Aulén. [He] was obviously reacting against low grade presentations of an angry wrathful God and substitution. And so, he said, "no, no, no, forget all that. It's about God winning the victory in Christ over the powers." So, it became an "either or." So many people have thought that because we believe in Penal Substitution we mustn't believe in "*Christus Victor*," That's Completely wrong!⁴⁰

Other Evangelical writers have begun to recognize that the early Christian view of the atonement is more nuanced than they had originally thought. For example, Joel B. Green has incorporated the term "kaleidoscope view" to describe his understanding of the atonement.⁴¹ Equally impressive long time PSA advocate, William Lane Craig recently released a book where he described his atonement theory with more CV nuances than he had in the past.⁴² However, despite these changes among the Evangelicals, many kingdom theologians and Neo-Anabaptists' research is still lagging behind. Writers such as J. Denny Weaver, Greg Boyd, and Bruxy Cavey still commonly present a historiography of the early church that excludes PSA.

³⁹ Aulén and Hebert, 10.

⁴⁰ NT Wright: Christus victor vs penal substitution atonement // Premier Christianity <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfnV69nIORw&t=2s>

⁴¹ Thomas R. Schreiner et al., *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby (IVP Academic, 2009).

⁴² Scot McKnight, *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2006).

The Patristic Evidence

Before the early Christian documents are explored it will be helpful call attention to exactly what it is that so many Neo-Anabaptist and kingdom theologians are insisting about the writings of the early church. Put simply, Neo-Anabaptists claim PSA metaphors are not used by the early Christians to explain the atonement. To challenge this thesis, this study will investigate passages that support PSA. Because many aspects of this theory can be blurry, this study will focus the investigation primarily to the first two words of PSA, “penal” and “substitution.”

That first word, “penal,” is perhaps the most controversial element of the model. In simple terms, it implies a legal setting. The dictionary definition “penal” reads, “relating to, used for, or prescribing the punishment of offenders under the legal system.” The “punishment” part of that definition is important. Models that support PSA insist that Jesus was “punished” for the sins of humanity. Going a little further, PSA teaches that Jesus took the “guilt” of our sin and the “curse” that we warranted. In PSA our sin, punishment, and guilt were somehow transferred from us to Jesus. By going to the cross, Jesus “suffered” for our sins, paying our price as a substitute for us. As a fulfillment and antitype of the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was a priestly offering to the Father. By this offering, our sins are forgiven by the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ upon the sinner. Almost all of these fundamental elements of PSA are rejected by modern kingdom theologians and Neo-Anabaptists.

The next word, “substitutionary,” simply implies that Jesus took our place. Some form of substitution is generally accepted by most camps. In *Christus Victor* atonement, Jesus may be our substitute, but it does not require the need for Jesus to receive our guilt and it does not require the Father to punish Jesus in our place as our substitute. It also certainly does not envision an Old Testament sacrifice, or expiation to appease the Father in heaven. In PSA, however, the substitution of Jesus unapologetically involves Jesus taking on our sins, receiving our punishment, and suffering in our place.

The Nuance

When reading through the most ancient quotes from the early church in an attempt to determine their stance on the atonement, one of the primary difficulties we encounter is the ambiguity. Similar to the New Testament, most of the passages in the early church can be interpreted in more than one way. For example, Clement of Rome spoke of the atonement saying, “Because of the love He had for us, Jesus Christ our Lord gave His blood for us by the will of God. He gave His flesh for our flesh, and His soul for our souls.”⁴³ PSA advocates read this quote and see it as an obvious proof text for their case. To them, Jesus being described as “giving his flesh” by “the will of God” obviously speaks of Jesus’ sacrificial offering to the Father. CV advocates, however, frame this quote differently. They read this and see the passage as evidence of Jesus offering his flesh (humanity) as a ransom to Satan. Because of this dilemma, the study will need to be limited to passages that are less ambiguous. Hundreds of these types of quotes punctuate the early Christians.⁴⁴ To help diminish misrepresentation of the author’s intent, larger context of the quotes will need to be included. Again, this study recognizes that the case for CV atonement in the early church has already been demonstrated by others. This study, however, is seeking to identify the neglected PSA passages. This study is simply arguing that the evidence needed to present *Christus Victor* as the “exclusive,” or even the “normative” view of the atonement in the

⁴³ Clement of Rome, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I, The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, Chapter 49.

⁴⁴ David Bercot, author of *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, provides a valuable source to many of these earlier quotes that can be taken in different directions.

early church is unfounded, and furthermore, that the use of PSA metaphors are not only present in the early church, but are used as frequently as other models.

Epistle of Barnabas

One of the earliest writings in early Christianity is the Epistle of Barnabas. This epistle is believed to have been written before 100 AD. Clement of Alexandria spoke of it as scripture. What is important about this work is that the writer gives a New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament sacrifice.⁴⁵ In the 5th chapter of this epistle, the writer is discussing Isaiah 53. The interpretation is important because of the way that the writer connects the sacrificial images of Isaiah 53 with salvation,

For to this end the Lord endured to deliver His flesh unto corruption, that by the remission of sins we might be cleansed, which cleansing is through the blood of His sprinkling. For the scripture concerning Him containeth some things relating to Israel, and some things relating to us. And it speaketh thus; *He was wounded for your transgressions, and He hath been bruised for our sins; by His stripes we were healed. As a sheep He was led to slaughter, as a lamb is dumb before his shearer.*⁴⁶

A few chapters later the writer continues this sacrifice theme. This time he discusses the sin offering found in the Book of Numbers. Barnabas writes, “Understand ye how in all plainness it is spoken unto you; the calf is Jesus, the men that offer it, being sinners, are they that offered Him for the slaughter.”⁴⁷

Epistle to Diognetus

The Epistle to Diognetus is an important early Christian work, not only because of its antiquity, but because of the subjects that it discusses. We do not know who wrote it, but it is generally believed to have been written in the second or third century. Important to this study is a section where the writer is instructing how to interpret the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. There are parts of this quote that satisfy both CV and PSA atonement models. For example, the word “ransom” is specifically used. However, there are several other elements that stand out in this quote that do not fit as well within a CV model. In particular, the treatment of our sin being exchanged for Christ’s righteousness should not be overlooked. The language is conspicuously legal when it speaks of our “justification,” and our sins being “covered” by His righteousness. In beautiful, poetic language the writer calls this a “sweet exchange.”

But when our wickedness had reached its height, and it had been clearly shown that its reward, punishment and death, was impending over us; and when the time had come which God had before appointed for manifesting His own kindness and power, how the one love of God, through exceeding regard for men, did not regard us with hatred, nor thrust us away, nor remember our iniquity against us, but showed great long-suffering, and bore with us, He Himself took on Him the burden of our iniquities, He gave His own Son as a ransom for us, the holy One for transgressors, the blameless One for the wicked, the righteous One for the unrighteous, the incorruptible One for the corruptible, the immortal One for those who are mortal. For what other thing was capable of covering our sins than His righteousness? By what

⁴⁵ David W. Bercot, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs: A Reference Guide to More Than 700 Topics Discussed by the Early Church Fathers* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1998).

⁴⁶ Barnabas, *Epistle of, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I*, 5:1-2.

⁴⁷ Barnabas, *Epistle of, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I*, 8:2.

other one was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, than by the only Son of God? O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation! O benefits surpassing all expectation! That the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors!⁴⁸

What a “sweet exchange,” indeed. The choice of the word “covering,” and the idea that our “wickedness” is taken away by being “hidden” in the “righteousness one” should not be missed.

Methodius

Methodius was the bishop in Lycia, in modern day Turkey. Methodius died as a martyr in the last great persecution of AD 312. His only complete surviving work is the *Banquet of the Ten Virgins*. In the discourse, Methodius is correcting the Jews by showing them the true meaning of the Passover. In doing so, Methodius makes a significant remark about the blood that came from the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. While much of this quote could be interrupted as either CV or PSA, the point to notice is his reference to the place that the sacrificial blood plays in making us free from God’s wrath in the final judgement.

As in the instance of the immolation of the Lamb, the mystery of which they regard as solely in remembrance of the deliverance of their fathers from Egypt, when, although the first-born of Egypt were smitten, they themselves were preserved by marking the door-posts of their houses with blood. Nor do they understand that by it also the death of Christ is personified, by whose blood souls made safe and sealed shall be preserved from wrath in the burning of the world; whilst the first-born, the sons of Satan, shall be destroyed with an utter destruction by the avenging angels, who shall reverence the seal of the Blood impressed upon the former.”⁴⁹

Lactantius

Lactantius, who lived between AD 250–325, was a prominent teacher of rhetoric before he converted to Christianity. Later in his life, Lactantius’ popularity as a teacher was so renowned that he became a tutor for Emperor Constantine’s son, Crispus. Similar to Methodius, Lactantius teaches about the proper understanding of the Old Testament Passover sacrifice. Also, like Methodius, an important point that Lactantius is making here is that the blood of the Lamb protects the Hebrews from the impending wrath of God.

And the Jews even now exhibit a figure of this transaction when they mark their thresholds with the blood of a lamb. For when God was about to smite the Egyptians, to secure the Hebrews from that infliction He had enjoined them to slay a white lamb without spot, and to place on their thresholds a mark from its blood. And thus, when the first-born of the Egyptians had perished in one night, the Hebrews alone were saved by the sign of the blood: not that the blood of a sheep had such efficacy in itself as to be the safety of men, but it was an image of things to come. For Christ was the white lamb without spot; that is, He was innocent, and just, and holy, who, being slain by the same Jews, is the salvation of all who have written on their foreheads the sign of blood—that is, of the cross, on which He shed His blood.⁵⁰

Origen of Alexandria

⁴⁸ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I, Epistle to Diognetus*, Chapter 8.

⁴⁹ Methodius, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume VI, Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, Discourse 9.1.

⁵⁰ Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. VII, 4.26.

The writings of Origen are also important for this study. Origen lived from AD 185-255. He was born to Christian parents in Alexandria, Egypt, the eldest of seven children. His father died as a martyr in 202, during a persecution instigated by the Roman Emperor Septimius Severus.⁵¹ Origen was known for his scholarship. He became a student of Clement of Alexandria and wrote a lot of books. In fact, he was the most prolific writer in the Ante-Nicene Church. Eusebius says that Origen dictated approximately two thousand works. He traveled extensively, and eventually took over the catechetical school of Alexandria from Clement. He has been called the “father of Christian theology.” Notably, Origen also wrote some of the first commentaries of the Bible. David Bercot says of Origen, “Many of his teachings reflect brilliant spiritual insights. On the other hand, some of his teachings exhibit strained or unsound theological speculation.”⁵² Important to this study, it should be remembered that Origen’s treatment of the ransom view of the atonement is well known in CV circles. It was Origen’s memorable quote that the ransom of Jesus was paid to Satan, and not to the Father, that Aulén mentioned in his work *Christus Victor*.^{53*} However, a careful reading of Origen demonstrates that, while it is true that Origen wrote about the atonement using ransom metaphors, Origen also incorporates clear PSA metaphors as well. It is in watching the way the Origen changes between the different metaphors that is crucial to this study. For advocates of PSA, one of the more important verses that surround the atonement debate is the concept of “propitiation,” as used in Romans 3:24-25,

“being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith.”

Fortunately, in his commentary of the book of Romans, Origen spends an usual amount of time discussing this very word *propitiation*. Significantly, when Origen begins addressing this section of scripture, he does so with stirring *Christus Victor* language,

Let us look carefully at the meaning of “redemption which is in Christ Jesus.” The term “redemption” refers to that which is given to enemies for those whom they are keeping in captivity, in order that they might restore them to their original freedom. Captives conquered by sin, as if by war, were being held fast, then, by the enemies of the human race.

All of this language, “captives conquered by sin” and freedom from “the enemies of the human race” shouts *Christus Victor*! But what Origen says next is critical. To explain Paul’s use of the word “propitiation,” Origen explains that he needed to employ a different metaphor. Remarkably, Origen explicitly mentions his change of themes and even calls the new metaphor, “even more profound.”

Although the holy Apostle has taught us many things about our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ which are to be marveled at, things which are spoken about him through a mystery, in this passage he has brought forth something even more admirable which I do not think is easy to find in other passages of Scripture. For above he had

⁵¹ Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1-5*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 3.

⁵² Bercot, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*.

⁵³ Origen of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew*, Book 16. *See my note above in the footnote section on page 13 for comments and some context on this famous quote.

said that Christ had given his very self as the redemption price for the entire human race so that he might redeem those who were being held in the captivity of their sins, ... Now he has added something even more profound and says, “God pre-determined him as a propitiation through faith in his blood.” This means of course that through the sacrifice of himself he would make God propitious to men and through this he would manifest his own righteousness as he forgives them their past sins...”⁵⁴

Origen’s use of multiple metaphors here is impressive. A reductionist reading of this passage will miss this critical point entirely. In switching to a PSA model, Origen’s brings attention to the use of the word “propitiation.”⁵⁵ Debates over Origen’s use of “propitiation” has a long history. While a full treatment of the word “propitiation” is beyond the scope of this paper, a few important observations can be made by carefully reading this section. First of all, it is important to notice that Origen recognizes the nuances surrounding the word “propitiation.”

“With one and the same understanding, then, the apostles designate Christ as the propitiatory, or propitiation, or, as is frequently found in the Latin manuscripts, propitiator. There is however no difference whether “propitiator” or “propitiation” or even “appeasement” is recorded, since in Greek it is always expressed by one and the same word.”⁵⁶

Giving clarity to the interpretation, Origen points to the use of this word in 1 John 2:2 saying,

“But what John has said, namely that he is ‘the appeasement’ or propitiation ‘for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the whole world.’”

Giving further clarification, Origen continues to point time and again to the Levitical priestly sacrifice as an example of the meaning of “propitiation.”⁵⁷ For example, in his commentary of Numbers, Origen specifically interprets the sacrificial system, even using the word “victim,” to describe Jesus’ offering himself to the Father.

If there had not been sin, it had not been necessary for the Son of God to become a lamb, nor had need been that he, having become incarnate, should be slaughtered, but he would have remained what he was, God the Word; but since sin entered into this world, whilst the necessity of sin requires a propitiation, and a propitiation is not made but by a victim, it was necessary that a victim should be provided for sin.⁵⁸

An important aspect of PSA that is often rejected by CV adherents surrounds the idea of God’s justice. PSA advocates often say that divine justice required the Father to use a mediator. Remarkably, Origen discusses this as well.

⁵⁴ Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1-5*, 216. Other translation such as the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* translate the word as “expiation.” See page 97 of that series.

⁵⁵ It is helpful to remind the readers that except for a few short Greek fragments, Origen’s *Commentary on Romans* has survived only in Latin from a translation done by Rufinus.

⁵⁶ *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans Books 1–5*,

⁵⁷ It should be noted here that in this passage Origen uses the idea of “propitiation” as the Mercy seat itself, and the Levitical sacrifice of the priest.

⁵⁸ Origen, *Homilies on Numbers*, ed. Christopher A. Hall, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, First edition. (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2009). 24.1.6

For God is just, and the one who is just could not justify the unjust; for that reason he wanted there to be the mediation of a propitiator so that those who were not able to be justified through their own works might be justified through faith in him. These things had to be said first, as much as pertains to the explanation of his discourse, in order that the apostolic reading might become clearer.⁵⁹

Finally, another controversial feature of PSA that is often rejected by CV advocates is the idea that the guilt and sin of mankind is transferred, or rather, “imputed” to Jesus. PSA advocates point to 2 Cor. 5:21 for support, “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us.” CV advocates generally reject the interpretation that our personal sin, and particularly our guilt, was imputed to Jesus. Commenting on the *Gospel of John*, in the place where John proclaims that Jesus as the Lamb who, “takes away the sin of the world,” Origen speaks about the idea of our guilt being imputed to the “Lamb of God” in an almost disturbingly graphic way.

“If God made Christ who knew no sin to be sin for us, then it could not be said of Him that there was no darkness in Him. For if Jesus was in the likeness of the flesh of sin and for sin, and condemned sin by taking upon Him the likeness of the flesh of sin, then it cannot be said of Him, absolutely and directly, that there was no darkness in Him.”⁶⁰

Bringing it all together, Origen explains that his use of multiple metaphors comes from the idea that Jesus is simply too complex to be reduced to one description.

“Let us now examine each of the designations recorded of the Savior, and let us carefully ponder what it is that is being depicted in his individual titles. You will thus find that indeed in him all the fullness of deity was pleased to dwell in bodily form. He is also the propitiatory and priest and sacrifice which is offered for the people.”⁶¹

Eusebius of Caesarea

Eusebius is another critically important figure in patristic thought for several reasons. He lived from AD 270-340. Jonathan J. Armstrong, a recent scholar and translator of his work says that it is significant that Eusebius was from Caesarea. Armstrong noted that this location not only provided Eusebius with ancient text from Palestine, but it also situated him between two of the largest academic centers in the church at his time—Alexandria and Antioch. His influence on our modern understanding of church history and theology is unquestionable. He was the bishop of the church in Caesarea, and most importantly to this study, he consumed himself in collecting the ancient books of his time and documenting the faith of the church.

Particularly important to this study are the research methods that Eusebius used. Eusebius wrote in Greek. Armstrong said that Eusebius’ constant comparison of the Greek of the Septuagint with the translations of Symmachus, Aquila and Theodotion tells us that Eusebius “searched for possible theological significance in even the minutest exchange of synonyms.” Armstrong says, “For Eusebius, the task of the text critic and the exegete—as well as the task of the historian, geographer and philosopher—is one and the same.”⁶² His *Ecclesiastical History* is considered a Christian classic and was translated into several

⁵⁹ Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1-5*. 3:25-26.

⁶⁰ Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the John, The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IX, 2.21.

⁶¹ Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1-5*.223.

⁶² Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentary on Isaiah*, ed. Joel C. Elowsky, trans. Jonathan J. Armstrong, First edition. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2013).

languages, even in ancient times.⁶³ Significant for this study, some of his most important theological works concerning the atonement have come into English only recently.

The Proof of the Gospel

Demonstratio Evangelica (The Proof of the Gospel) was a major two-part work by Eusebius. In Part one, called *Praeparatio* (preparation), Eusebius wrote that his object was “to show the nature of Christianity to those who know not what it means”⁶⁴ In part two, he wanted to go deeper. In *Demonstratio*, Eusebius said that he wrote for those who are ready for “the reception of the higher truths.”⁶⁵ Like Origen, Eusebius did not try to reduce his atonement theory into one mold. Through this massive work, Eusebius weaves multiple atonement metaphors to explain different aspects of soteriology. Critical to this study is that when speaking about the variety of ways the work of Christ can be explained, Eusebius specifically mentions his multifaceted methodology saying,

The reason is not one but many. First, that the kingdom of the Logos may be established over the living and dead; secondly, to cleanse our sins by allowing Himself to be struck and by becoming a curse for us; thirdly, to offer Himself in sacrifice to God for the whole world; fourthly, to destroy the reign of the devil; fifthly, to ensure to His disciples everlasting life with God.⁶⁶

This passage is remarkable because in the same sentence Eusebius mentions “destroying the reign of the devil” and Jesus becoming a “sacrifice to God.” Like Origen, when describing the sacrifice of Christ, Eusebius frequently points to the priestly sacrifice. Significantly, when demonstrating this point, Eusebius looks to Isaiah 53 for support. After first quoting Isaiah, Eusebius explains,

In this he shows that Christ, being apart from all sin, will receive the sins of men on Himself. And therefore He will suffer the penalty of sinners, and will be pained on their behalf; and not on His own. And if He shall be wounded by the strokes of blasphemous words, this also will be the result of our sins. For He is weakened through our sins, so that we, when He had taken on Him our faults and the wounds of our wickedness, might be healed by His stripes.⁶⁷

Later in the book, when describing this idea further, Eusebius once again explicitly mentions Jesus receiving our sins and taking our punishment.

And the Lamb of God not only did this, but was chastised on our behalf, and suffered a penalty He did not owe, but which we owed because of the multitude of our sins; and so He became the cause of the forgiveness of our sins, because He received death for us, and transferred to Himself the scourging, the insults, and the dishonor, which were due to us, and drew down on Himself the apportioned curse, being made a curse for us. And what is that but the price of our souls?⁶⁸

⁶³ National Library of Russia, Codex Syriac 1

⁶⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea: *Praeparatio Evangelica (Preparation for the Gospel)*. Tr. E.H. Gifford (1903) Introduction

⁶⁵ Eusebius (of Caesarea Caesarea) Bishop of, *The Proof of the Gospel: Being the Demonstratio Evangelica of Eusebius of Caesarea*. (Society for promoting Christian knowledge, 1920). Vo 1, Pg ix.

⁶⁶ Eusebius, *The Proof of the Gospel* Book 4.12.

⁶⁷ Eusebius, *The Proof of the Gospel* Book 3.2.

⁶⁸ Eusebius, *The Proof of the Gospel* Book 10.1

Commentary on Isaiah

One of the more important resources in investigating patristic atonement theory is found in a Eusebius' *Commentary on Isaiah*.⁶⁹ Remarkably, this work was only translated into English in 2010. Translator Jonathan J. Armstrong says, "The fact that the *Commentary on Isaiah* has never before appeared in any modern language is all the more remarkable when one remembers that this commentary is the first Christian commentary on the prophet Isaiah to have survived to the present."⁷⁰ In this commentary the patristic exegesis of Isaiah comes to life. Addressing the passage from Isaiah 53:3, "and we did not esteem Him," Eusebius said,

"But he was the very Savior, who heals our souls and cleanses every sin! Therefore, he continues on: This one bears our sins and suffers pain for us, and we accounted him to be in trouble and calamity and ill treatment."⁷¹

Coming to the passage, "He was wounded for our transgressions," just as he did in his other works, Eusebius interprets the verse as talking about our punishment having been put upon Jesus. Curiously, he mentions, "Even as children we had this view."

Even as children we had this view concerning him—that he suffered all these things because of us in order that he might set us free from all retribution. Therefore, he continues on: But he was wounded because of our sins and has been weakened because of our sins. But Aquila⁷² says: But he has been profaned by our lawlessness, crushed by our lawless acts. For he was truly profaned when "he became a curse for us" and when he was wounded and profaned and endured all these terrible things, not because of certain of his own sins but because of ours! And the discipline of our peace was on him. For, although we should have suffered and been disciplined because of our sins, they fell on him for our peace with God.⁷³

Finally, commenting on Isaiah 53:11,⁷⁴ "and he shall bear their sins," Eusebius once again describes Jesus taking on the sins of the ungodly. Notably in this passage, Eusebius discusses the change that happens in the sinner who repents and comes to Jesus.⁷⁵ Notably, Eusebius said here that it was by Jesus going to the cross that He, "stripped them of the garment of sin and perfected them as righteous."

⁶⁹ Eusebius, *Commentary on Isaiah*.

⁷⁰ Eusebius, *Commentary on Isaiah*. Intro.

⁷¹ Eusebius, *The Proof of the Gospel*, 262.

⁷² "Aquila" and "Symmachus" are the names of two version of the Septuagint that Eusebius is using to study this section of Scripture.

⁷³ Eusebius, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 263.

⁷⁴ To keep the flow of the study I will put Eusebius' treatment of Isaiah 53:10 here in the footnotes. There is actually an important thing to say about the way the early church looked at Isaiah 53:10. Our modern NKJV reads "Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief." However, the Septuagint differs slightly from this in an important way. Eusebius said, "Therefore 'he died for all,' in order that he might cleanse and 'take away the sin of the world.' Therefore, also his God and Father judged him to cleanse him from his blow—that is, from the suffering that was laid on him." There is a nuance happening here that sheds light to the different elements of PSA in the early Church. The Greek Septuagint (LXX) wording creates a significant difference from the Hebrew text. The LXX reads, "The Lord also is pleased to purge him *from* his stroke." As the quotes above indicates, the LXX reading still portrayed the father "punishing" Jesus for our sins of the World. However, this reading doesn't show the Father being "pleased" doing it. The LXX seems to allow the early church to have a PSA that presented Jesus working voluntary and more in harmony with the Father. It is interesting that Origen speaking of the wrath of God said that God is wrathful not like a tyrant but as a parent who, "put on threatening looks, not because we are angry but for the child's good" (Homilies on Jeremiah 18.6; Young 1979, 168).

⁷⁵ Take note that Eusebius says that Jesus grants this righteousness to those "who were *formerly* sinners."

And he himself shall bear their sins, or according to Symmachus: And he himself bore their impieties. Taking on himself the impieties of those who were formerly sinners and ungodly, he stripped them of the garment of sin and perfected them as righteous. For this reason, he continues on to say: Therefore he shall inherit many. For it was because he assumed on himself the sins of many that he also has been able to make everyone his inheritance. If there had been no one to forgive sins, they would have continued on in their faults and never attained salvation. And now, after he assumed their sins, he then because of this also received them as an inheritance from the Father.⁷⁶

John Chrysostom

Finally, leaving the Ante-Nicene era, John Chrysostom is one more writer that really should be mentioned. One of the things that Gustaf Aulén did to discredit PSA was to suggest that anything that sounded close to PSA in the early church was Latin as opposed to Greek. The writings of both Eusebius and Origen should be enough to dispel this error. Nevertheless, reviewing the writings of Chrysostom should lend a needed balance to help correct this historical miosis.⁷⁷ John Chrysostom is considered by many to be the quintessential Greek theologian. The Catholic encyclopedia says, “John — whose surname ‘Chrysostom’ is generally considered the most prominent “doctor” (theologian) of the Greek Church and the greatest preacher ever heard in a Christian pulpit.”⁷⁸ Early church historian David Bercot said, referring to the Bible commentaries written by Chrysostom,

We recognize that many New Testament passages are difficult for the modern reader to understand. We don’t speak the same language, we live in a very different culture, and so many changes have come into the church during the past 2000 years. It certainly would be handy to know how the early Christians understood various New Testament passages. Regrettably, no such commentary exists for the pre-Nicene period (A. D. 90-325). But the next best thing does exist. And that is the sermons of John Chrysostom ...his understanding of Scripture is usually very similar to the ante-Nicene Christian writers.

Several of Chrysostom’s works speak of the atonement with PSA metaphors. However, one of his clearest statements comes from his commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For Him who knew no sin He made to be sin on our account.” In this passage several PSA metaphors come together—in particular, the wrath of God, the punish of Jesus for our sins, and the imputed sin of the ungodly to Christ. Finally, at the end of this passage, Chrysostom completes his “penal” metaphors with a courtroom setting, specifically mentioning the transfer of the criminal’s punishment to the king’s son. Introducing the section of the commentary, Chrysostom reflects on the wrath of God saying,

I say nothing of what has gone before, that ye have outraged Him, Him that had done you no wrong, Him that had done you good, that He exacted not justice, that He is

⁷⁶ Eusebius, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 265.

⁷⁷ Likewise, N. T. Wright, in his recent book, *The Day the Revolution Began* said, “to put it crudely, the Eastern Orthodox churches never had “an Anselm.” That alone should alert us to the possibility that some of our great controversies may have more to do with fresh interpretative schemes introduced at a later date than with the original meaning of the Bible. Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury in the eleventh century, was the first one to work out in detail what has come to be known as the “satisfaction” theory of the atonement.”

⁷⁸ Baur, C. (1910). St. John Chrysostom. *In the Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved April 19, 2021

first to beseech, though first outraged; let none of these things be set down at present. Ought ye not in justice to be reconciled for this one thing only that He hath done to you now?' And what hath He done? "Him that knew no sin He made to be sin for you." For had He achieved nothing but done only this, think how great a thing it were to give His Son for those that had outraged Him. But now He hath both well achieved mighty things, and besides, hath suffered Him that did no wrong to be punished for those who had done wrong.⁷⁹

Next, Chrysostom brings attention to the guilt and shame of sin brought upon Jesus,

But he did not say this: but mentioned that which is far greater than this. What then is this? "Him that knew no sin," he says, Him that was righteousness itself, "He made sin," that is suffered as a sinner to be condemned, as one cursed to die. "For cursed is he that hangeth on a tree." (Gal. 3:13) For to die thus was far greater than to die; and this he also elsewhere implying, saith, "Becoming obedient unto death, yea the death of the cross." (Phil. 2:8) For this thing carried with it not only punishment, but also disgrace. Reflect therefore how great things He bestowed on thee. For a great thing indeed it were for even a sinner to die for any one whatever; but when He who undergoes this both is righteous and dieth for sinners; and not dieth only, but even as one cursed; and not as cursed only, but thereby freely bestoweth upon us those great goods which we never looked for;⁸⁰

With rhetorical flare, Chrysostom continues to build his message in a step-by-step fashion, exalting the idea that through Christ's sacrifice the sinner actually receives the "righteousness of God."

For he says, that "we might become the righteousness of God in Him;" what words, what thought shall be adequate to realize these things? 'For the righteous,' saith he, 'He made a sinner; that He might make the sinners righteous.' Yea rather, he said not even so, but what was greater far; for the word he employed is not the habit, but the quality itself. For he said not "made" Him a sinner, but "sin;" not, 'Him that had not sinned' only, but "that had not even known sin; that we" also "might become," he did not say 'righteous,' but, "righteousness," and, "the righteousness of God."⁸¹

Reflecting on this truth, Chrysostom reminds the reader that this atonement is a salvation "by grace."

For this is the righteousness "of God" when we are justified not by works, (in which case it were necessary that not a spot even should be found,) but by grace, in which case all sin is done away. And this at the same time that it suffers us not to be lifted up, (seeing the whole is the free gift of God,) teaches us also the greatness of that which is given. For that which was before was a righteousness of the Law and of works, but this is "the righteousness of God."⁸²

⁷⁹ Chrysostom, *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom, on the Second Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, Homily 11*, 5:21.

⁸⁰ Chrysostom, *Homily 11*.

⁸¹ Chrysostom, *Homily 11*.

⁸² Chrysostom, *Homily 11*.

Finally, Chrysostom frames the whole atonement theme in a courtroom setting. Most outstandingly, Chrysostom mentions that the king transferred not only the punishment to his son, but even the guilt.

If one, that was himself a king, beholding a robber and malefactor under punishment, gave his well-beloved son, his only-begotten, and true, to be slain; and transferred the death, and the guilt as well, from him to his son, (who was himself of no such character,) that he might both save the condemned man, and clear him from his evil reputation...⁸³

Interestingly, Chrysostom finishes the homily saying that meditating on such truths should produce holy fear in the life of the Christian, “If then we love Christ as it behooves to love Him, we shall punish ourselves when we sin.”⁸⁴

Conclusion

The early Anabaptist leader, Michael Sattler, mentioned earlier as the leader who responded surprisingly generous with the Reformers over their definitions of soteriology, wrote a tract in 1530 called *On the Satisfaction of Christ*. In this tract Sattler said, “Verily, blessed be he who remains on the middle path, who turns aside neither to the work-righteous who promised blessedness or the forgiveness of sins, through works done without faith... Nor to the side of the scribes, who although they have forsaken works, then turn aside to the right, and teach in the name of “gospel” a faith without works.”⁸⁵ What wisdom there is in Sattler’s approach.

Because of the tendency to patristic reductionism, Neo-anabaptists have moved away from expressing their theology with the humility they had in centuries past. The difficulty with any form of reductionism is that by relying too easily on simple formulas, deeper truths can hide undiscovered or ignored. Such is the case with the atonement doctrine of the early church. If there is any doctrine that deserves epistemological humility, it would seem that answering questions like, “Why God became man,” should be one of them. Reducing modern physiological or theological thought is one thing, but when we begin to reduce the doctrine of the ancient church to fit our current theological novelty, we risk making a mistake at a much more fundamental level. It is better to allow the patristic voice to speak in a prose misunderstood, than to transpose their majestic chorus into a child’s taunt. Calling the miracle of the sacrifice of Christ “divine child abuse” seems to be getting close to this. G.K. Chesterton, in his classic work *Orthodoxy*, explained his commitment to being shaped by ancient wisdom over novel ideas saying, “I will not call it my philosophy; for I did not make it. God and humanity made it; and it made me.”⁸⁶ Coming to the Ancient church with a humility like this can reap an unexpected harvest.

As this study has demonstrated, the collected witness of the early Church reveals an understanding of the atonement that does not fit perfectly into one theological frame. Moreover, as the record of the early church shows, to claim that penal substitutionary

⁸³ Chrysostom, *Homily 11*.

⁸⁴ This is actually an important point that should be mention here. While Origen, Eusebius and Chrysostom spoke clearly that our salvation was by Grace, through Faith, there is no hint in the early church that once a person becomes a Christian they cannot fall away. To Chrysostom, these grace passages engendered awe and even fear, not antinomianism. This is true in other early Christians as well. For example, following the section quoted above from Origen, he went on to say, “But perhaps someone who hears these things should become lax and negligent in doing good, if in fact faith alone suffices for him to be justified. To this person we shall say that if anyone acts unjustly after justification, it is scarcely to be doubted that he has rejected the grace of justification.” See, *Commentary on Romans*, pg. 227.

⁸⁵ John D. Roth, *Anabaptism In Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, trans. Walter Klaassen, n.d., 57.

⁸⁶ Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1909), 15.

atonement was not a part of this heritage is unfounded. That said, it would be equally incorrect to eliminate *Christus Victor* metaphors from the early church as well. By holding tightly to both of these perspectives the church is forced to look for a theological resolution deep enough to make both sides fit. This should not be done in a rush. Even using a term like “kaleidoscope” is likely to be letting ourselves off too easily. When early Christian writers such as Origen and Irenaeus spoke about the atonement of Jesus Christ, they seemed to be describing something deeper and even more ontologically existential than mere creedal precision or variety.

Anabaptist historian Alvin Beachy suggested in 1977 that beneath the soteriological diversity of the early Anabaptists lies not merely a kaleidoscope of ideas, but rather a profound unifying and sanctifying doctrine of Grace.⁸⁷ To Beachy, this salvation, as described by the early Anabaptists and the early church looked like something closer to Greek Orthodox “Theosis” or “divinization” than either ascetic moralism or evangelical antinominalism. As seen in these quotes above, to the early church, salvation is genuinely the work of grace in heart of the believer. Yet, at the same time, such a salvation is not actualized, and certainly not claimed until it is manifested by a genuine Jesus-following life. Interestingly, Thomas Finger said, “So far as I know, Anabaptist scholars have never seriously addressed Beachy's main thesis about divinization.”⁸⁸ Obviously, it is beyond the scope of this study to work that out.

The aim of this study was to call for an epistemological humility in the way that Neo-Anabaptists present the patristic historiography surrounding the doctrine of the atonement. In closing, Mennonite historian John D. Roth,⁸⁹ speaking on the doctrine of the atonement in his book *Beliefs*, made a profound statement, “Acknowledgement that all our language about God is limited does not suggest a weak view of the atonement. Rather, it prompts us toward a continued posture of humility and gentleness in our witness of the truth.”⁹⁰ This is well said. Perhaps by sitting at the feet of antiquity with humility like this, such wisdom could inspire the church to once again marvel over the glorious truth of a salvation in the blood of Christ, while at the same time, practically manifesting and propagating on this earth a “kingdom that cannot be shaken.”

⁸⁷ Beachy Alvin J, *The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation* (Nieuwkoop: Brill | Hes & De Graaf, 1977).

⁸⁸ Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, 54.

⁸⁹ John D Roth is the editor of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* and director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism at Goshen College.

⁹⁰ John D. Roth, *Beliefs: Mennonite Faith and Practice* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 2005), 73.

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