Christus Satisfactor: An Anselmian Approach to the Doctrine of Atonement

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CHRISTUS SATISFACTOR:
AN ANSELMIAN APPROACH TO THE DOCTRINE OF ATONEMENT

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CHRISTUS SATISFACTOR:
AN ANSELMIAN APPROACH TO THE DOCTRINE OF ATONEMENT

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with a
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In this dissertation, I develop and defend a revised satisfaction account of the Christian doctrine of atonement based primarily on the thought of St. Anselm of Canterbury. The project thus has both a historical and a normative dimension, since I offer an interpretation of Anselm, and then derive from it an account of the atonement as a candidate for how Christians ought to think about and understand what God has accomplished in Christ on our behalf.

I begin, in Chapter 2, by examining the most common way of framing the doctrine of atonement today, which I call the “atonement theory paradigm”—a paradigm into which Anselm is supposed to fit neatly. The atonement theory paradigm assumes that a set of traditional concepts applied to Christ’s work stand for theories of atonement which are fundamentally alternatives to one another. According to this paradigm, at a face-value reading, either Christ saves by defeating oppressive forces and liberating us from them (Christus Victor), or he saves us by offering himself to the Father as a perfect sacrifice, or he saves us by providing a saving teaching and example of the proper love of God (moral exemplar), etc. What follows from this is that one either has to select one such theory or else interpret them more loosely and metaphorically, holding them together without integrating them into a unified view. I argue that neither of these
approaches is ideal from the perspective of Christian theology; all things being equal, it would be preferable to hold together such deeply-entrenched theological claims with their full force. Thankfully, they do not actually contradict one another in any obvious way.

In Chapter 3, I proceed to develop a detailed interpretation of Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* which understands him not to be presenting an alternative theory to other supposed theories of atonement but to be identifying an underlying logic according to which all of the main traditional ways of talking Christ’s work can be understood as fitting and necessary. That is, I argue that Anselm does not fit the atonement theory paradigm, and that he presents us with a way of understanding Christ’s work that avoids the weaknesses of that paradigm. Attending to the details of Anselm’s text, as well as to several of his earlier treatises, it becomes apparent that many prominent criticisms of his theology of atonement hinge on fitting it into the atonement theory paradigm, and hence my reinterpretation helps to show where such critiques miss the mark.

Moving from there, in Chapter 4 I develop a revised satisfaction account that moves beyond a reproduction of Anselm. I do this by attending to another medieval theologian who made use of Anselm’s concept of satisfaction, namely St. Thomas Aquinas. Thomas differs from Anselm on some important points, including especially the question of whether God made use of the means of satisfaction to bring about the salvation of human persons by necessity, or as a contingent choice from among other genuine alternatives. Thomas also provides a helpful elaboration to Anselm, since his account of Christ’s Passion in the *Summa Theologiae* is more systematic and comprehensive than Anselm’s treatise. Thomas thus helps to show more clearly than Anselm that satisfaction is compatible with other atonement concepts. Finally, Thomas’s
concept of friendship with God, and his connection of satisfaction with the maintenance of such friendship (through the sacrament of penance) helps to make it more clear than it is in *Cur Deus Homo* how a satisfaction account of atonement relates to the spiritual life of a Christian striving to grow in holiness and in the love of God. By considering these differences and elaborations, I arrive at a revised satisfaction account that is based on Anselm but has a greater breadth than one could get from Anselm’s text by itself.

Finally, with this revised account of the atonement in hand, in Chapter 5, I consider one prominent form of critique normally applied to satisfaction accounts by contemporary theologians. According to many feminist, womanist, and other liberationist thinkers, accounts like the one I develop here are harmful to oppressed persons, such as those undergoing spousal abuse, because they provide a motive for thinking that passively accepting such suffering is Christ-like. I examine how the inference involved in this critique works, and then argue that if we attend to the details of our satisfaction account, we can see that it does not hold.

On this account of satisfaction, God does not value suffering for its own sake, but only for the sake of some good end, ultimately justice. On the contrary, our account suggests that whenever possible those who perpetrate injustice ought to try to make satisfaction, and that the satisfaction assigned ought to be of the sort which would teach wrongdoers to will what they ought to will towards the ones wronged. I consider two cases to elucidate this response: the case of spousal abuse, and the case of calls for reparations for slavery in the United States. In both cases, I argue that the logic of the satisfaction account developed here runs in the opposite way to that supposed by the critique, since it would entail that is either necessary or extremely fitting according to
justice for the wrongdoers to perform an act of satisfaction rather than be forgiven without satisfaction.
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CHAPTER 1

A SKETCH OF THE ARGUMENT

Many of our holy Fathers and teachers, following the Apostles, speak frequently and on a grand scale about the logical principles of our faith. Their aim in doing so is to . . . nourish those who, with cleansed hearts, already take delight in this same logic of the faith . . .

I consider that the understanding which we gain in this life stands midway between faith and revelation. . . . the nearer someone comes to the attainment of this understanding, the nearer that person approaches to revelation, for which we all pant in anticipation. . . .

I am attempting for a little while, insofar as the heavenly grace deigns to allow me, to arise to contemplate the logic of our beliefs; and when I discover something which I used not previously to see, I am happy to disclose this to other people, my object being that I may learn through the judgment of others what I may confidently hold on to.

Saint Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, Commendatio¹

The Question and its Answer

Christians have long proclaimed that in the life, teachings, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, God accomplished an astonishing work on our behalf. Through these events, God has decisively overcome the damage wrought by sin and restored us to our intended relation to Him. The question of this dissertation is this: how are we who believe this to understand it? How is that God has worked in Christ to achieve our salvation? In

scripture and the Christian tradition, a variety of concepts have been used to describe what exactly has happened: we have been healed, ransomed, redeemed, taught, and liberated. Our debt has been satisfied, our punishment averted, the oppressive forces of sin, death, and the devil defeated, our sin atoned for, our damaged natures healed, and our proper relationship to God restored. The question, then, is what to do with this cluster of claims. It would seem that either some or all of these ways of describing what Christ has accomplished can be accepted, while perhaps some might be set aside or replaced with new ones. We need to discern to what extent they can be held together. We hope to be able to say something about what they each mean, and how they relate to one another.

For much of the modern era, these different ways of speaking have been thought of as distinct theories, models, or metaphors for an event called the atonement. We will consider whether this way of framing the matter is entirely felicitous in due course. For the moment, it is only necessary to be clear that, although it might be reasonable to think of atonement as simply one facet of Christ’s work, here, as a terminological matter, I will use the term “atonement” to refer to whatever it is that Christ accomplishes towards the salvation of human persons. By atonement, then, I mean not simply to some single facet or aspect of Christ’s saving work, nor to any particular single concept such as expiation or propitiation, but rather as a sort of stand-in term for what may turn out to be multiple discrete facets.

By drawing whatever Christ accomplishes under the one term of atonement, I do not intend to impose a conceptual unity too easily. As far as the question is concerned, we

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2 I am grateful to Peter Martens for making this point with admirable clarity in an unpublished paper presented at the 2015 Christian Scholars Conference.
might well say that the atonement consists of multiple discrete acts: perhaps Christ does X, and Y, and Z, and we can say nothing more about their interconnection than that X, Y, and Z, are all things Christ does for the salvation of human persons. Nor do I mean to assume that what Christ accomplishes has some connection to intuitive meanings of the word “atonement.” It could be, as far as the question is concerned, that Christ simply heals us, or sets us an example to follow, and does nothing else—no offering of propitiation, or satisfaction, or bearing of punishment. The point is simply to begin with the term more or less as it has come to be used as a starting point.

My thesis is this: we should understand what Christ has done as a multifaceted work of satisfaction: Christ makes an offering to God which fulfills everything humanity owed to God, which is to say, everything which God intended humanity to give to Him, repairing the damage caused by sin, and establishing humanity in the role for which God created them. Satisfaction, I will argue, does not replace other concepts like victory, or moral example, or healing, but instead provides a sort of organizing logic and unity for them, rendering them intelligible, coherent, and beautiful.

The concept of satisfaction as applied to Christ’s work comes chiefly, of course from St. Anselm of Canterbury, and thus my thesis thus involves defending his great treatise, *Cur Deus Homo*, as substantially (though not entirely) right. This project thus involves a sympathetic reinterpretation and defense of Anselm, and one which I hope renders his thought plausibly and attractively. Even so, I am not simply reporting and repeating what Anselm has said. Instead, my goal is to build on his thought in a constructive way, with some effort to distinguish between the core satisfaction account I mean to defend from other aspects of Anselm’s thought. My intention is thus both to
expand on Anselm’s thought, and to show where one might hold to a satisfaction account in the sense I am defending while rejecting Anselm’s reasoning about it on this or that point. Thus, my goal is to develop and defend an approach to the doctrine of atonement which is Anselmian without being exactly Anselm’s. The result, to the extent it is successful, will be a contribution on both historical and systematic fronts.

**Background Assumptions and Desiderata**

What will count as a good answer to the question I have laid out depends on background assumptions about what theology is and how it is done. While I cannot spell out an entire theological methodology, and can offer little defense of what methodological commitments I do make explicit, it still seems worthwhile to offer some sense of the perspective from which I approach the topic, and what sort of desiderata I intend my answer to fulfill. My intent is not to limit the applicability or usefulness of this project to people who share all of these commitments, but simply to own up to where the project is coming from, and what sorts of things I will tend to take for granted.

I approach theology as an unapologetically confessional discipline. Like Anselm, my aim to grow in the understanding of that which I believe. More precisely, it is my hope to understand (as I seek to believe) what it is that the Church teaches, since it is to the Church that God has entrusted saving knowledge of Himself and His acts. Theology seeks to understand God (in the way appropriate to the human creature), and the theologian must proceed on the basis of what God has generously chosen to share, through the means He has chosen to share it.\(^3\) It is thus in the nature of the case that

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\(^3\) C.f., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Iq1a1. Thomas’s account of theology is apt. As he notes, while it may be true that some knowledge of God is available through natural reason, it can only be acquired with great difficulty and with many errors, and much about God would be impossible to know by
theology proceeds from premises that reason could not demonstrate, but which are known through the virtue of faith—faith being the virtue of steadfastly believing what God has revealed on the basis that He is the one who revealed it.

From this way of formulating the task of theology the question of what I mean by the Church, and what God has revealed to it, arises immediately. I answer this question in a self-consciously ecumenical and catholic way: without offering a definition, I suggest that the Church can at least be picked out in a preliminary way as the historically-extended community of those who have received and passed on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the community which, indeed, is described by that Gospel and a constitutive element in it.\(^4\) They have received it, moreover, through a rich and diverse canonical heritage: scriptures, creeds, liturgies, sacraments, saints, teachers, and so on.

Indeed, the various elements of this heritage are rightly understood as the medicine of the Holy Spirit, the means of grace by which human persons are healed and brought into union with God.\(^5\) The Church thus described is, of course, visibly and tragically divided, and various parts of its heritage remain contested—this is an important feature of our divisions, both as cause and as effect. Even so, the swath of that heritage which historically precedes the Church’s most significant and enduring divisions (especially the schism between East and West and the Protestant Reformation) remains in a distinctive way available to the entire Church. This roughly shared heritage provides the


divided Church with a partially-realized sort of unity, although we continually fail to act
in accordance with it, and perhaps we lack the wisdom to see how to do so.

In any case, Christians ought to see this complex and multifaceted heritage as the
means through which God has worked to bring us into union with Himself. An essential
part of this union is related to our minds: He has enabled us to come to know the truth
about Him. For that reason, we must strive to understand this heritage (and especially the
parts which constitute an explicit teaching tradition, such as the Christian scriptures and
creeds) as testifying coherently to a single reality, namely the one God, in such a way that
we who accept this testimony might come to love and worship Him in truth. We must
resist the temptation to flatten out the diverse voices within that tradition too easily,
minimizing genuine tensions rather than attending to them honestly. Nonetheless, we
have here a basic motivation to prefer, ceteris paribus, a theology which holds together
diverse elements of traditional Christian teaching over one which is narrowly selective of
elements within that tradition. I shall argue below that an Anselmian satisfaction account
of the atonement is more properly of the former sort rather than the latter; here I simply
lay out my basis for finding this to be a good and valuable feature for a theology of
atonement.

More substantively, I take it that the most (and perhaps only) plausible way to
take the elements of the canonical heritage which constitute a tradition of teaching as
means of grace which unite us to God includes believing the most central elements of that
tradition to speak truly about God. I accept, therefore, the content of the Nicene-

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6 I am not presenting this as an inference, so that one is epistemically justified in believing that the central
teaching elements of the Christian tradition speak truly about God just on the basis that this is the most
plausible way to make sense of one’s experience of being united to God through them. I am holding off on
Constantinopolitan Creed and the Chalcedonian Definition. I take it that this commits me broadly to classical Trinitarian theism, and to a classical Christology along with it. That is, I am operating under the view that the classic divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, aseity, eternality, simplicity, and so forth, are appropriately said of God, that God is Triune, being three Persons in one being or nature, and that Christ is on divine Person, Son, possessed of two natures, divine and human. So, naturally I will appeal to such doctrinal claims as premises in for thinking and arguing about the doctrine of atonement.

All of that said, the way this teaching tradition functions is not simply to provide a set of answers as an end to discussion, nor even to cut off questioning of its claims. Perhaps no one shows more clearly than Anselm that rigorous questioning can be an extremely generative exercise from the point of view of faith. The elements of the canonical heritage which aim at teaching do so by way of healing our minds and hearts, and they do so in a way appropriate to human nature: as we say the Creed, sing and pray the Psalms, hear the narratives of scripture and sermons expounding them, and reflect on the writings of great teachers of the Christian past, we are invited to work out together a way of understanding what we are saying. In this life, our understanding is always partial, and yet we hope by the grace of God that our reasoning together might lead us deeper and deeper into the Truth that is Jesus Christ. It is in this spirit, and to this end, that I seek to

the question of how one might be justified in making this inference, and instead focusing on the specific role these elements play within the larger soteriological function of the canonical heritage, however it is that one might be justified in accepting that in fact what that heritage teaches about God is true. I follow William Abraham’s canonical theism in prioritizing the ontology and soteriology over epistemology when it comes to elements of the canonical heritage. See William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk, eds., Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).
take up the question of how we should understand the doctrine of atonement, and to make a case for a positive and constructive reception of Anselm’s reflection on it.

**A Sketch of the Argument**

I develop the argument for my thesis in this way. First, in Chapter 2, I offer an analysis of the most common way of thinking about the doctrine of atonement in the modern and contemporary theology, which I call the atonement theory paradigm. The atonement theory paradigm involves the assumption that, if taken straightforwardly, the various concepts and models attached to Christ’s saving work in scripture and tradition (for example, *Christus Victor*, sacrifice, or moral exemplar) are fundamentally alternatives to one another. This assumption then leads to two rough options: on the one hand, we might simply choose one strand within the tradition as true or legitimate, or, on the other, we might say that none of them are straightforwardly true, but all are instead to be held in a looser way, as metaphors rather than literal claims.

In the chapter, I consider selected examples of both alternatives: in the former category, Gustaf Aulén and Kathryn Tanner, and Joel Green, Mark Baker, and Scot McKnight in the latter. I argue that the basic premise driving both approaches (the atonement theory paradigm) does not withstand scrutiny: there is no obvious contradiction involved in saying that Christ saves by defeating the devil, by offering a perfect sacrifice to the Father, by his teaching and example, and so on. Indeed, these things tend to appear right next to one another in scripture and in the patristic writings. Thus, for the project of faith seeking understanding, we ought not settle for either alternative, but instead should press for a way of understanding these elemental theological claims about what Christ accomplishes as true, coherent together as moments.
or facets of a single, wonderful, and supremely fitting divine act.

In Chapter 3, I develop a reading of Anselm as engaged in exactly this sort of project, and thus as not adequately captured by the atonement theory paradigm. This might seem surprising, because it contrasts with common readings of Anselm. Both those who approve of his theology and those who do not often understand Anselm to be a seminal figure in the history of the doctrine of atonement in two ways. (1) He supposedly crystallized and articulated a particular influential and archetypal theory of the atonement (namely the satisfaction theory), and (2) he was perhaps the first thinker to organize his theology of atonement in the form of a full-fledged, rigorously coherent and rational theory. On this widely accepted reading, Anselm appears as the archetypal single-theory atonement theologian.

In challenging this view, I draw on an ongoing re-reading of Anselm’s work as a whole. This large-scale revision is expressed in many recent authors including David Bentley Hart, David Whidden, Eileen Sweeney, Nicholas Cohen, and others. This developing view emphasizes the crucial and often missed lines of continuity between Anselm and the patristic tradition. After sketching out the popular view, I contribute to this more recent interpretive trajectory, first by attending to relevant aspects of the theological background to CDH provided by Anselm’s earlier treatises. These earlier works reveal a greater degree of continuity between Anselm and the patristic tradition than is usually recognized, and moreover they provide a basis for doubting the way Anselm’s theology of atonement is usually presented.

From there, I proceed to offer a reading of CDH itself. I will argue that, on inspection, Anselm cannot be read as proposing a new atonement theory that is simply an
alternative to other, previous theories. Instead, he is mainly engaged in an effort to understand together the elements he takes himself to receive from the tradition in a single comprehensive vision. I draw attention here to substantial elements which Anselm does not seem to think himself at liberty to discard in his own discussion of the saving nature of Christ’s work—and these elements are precisely those which are normally identified as alternative atonement theories. Therefore, I argue, Anselm is not arguing over what atonement is, but rather about how and why the atonement is what it is—why, given what it is, it is fitting and necessary. He thus presents a real alternative to the atonement theory paradigm. And, moreover, once he is reinterpreted this way, his position turns out to be more promising than the more typical way of interpreting him.

In Chapter 4, I proceed with the Anselmian account of atonement developed in Chapter 3, and subject it to critique and development by comparison with the way Thomas Aquinas develops his theology of atonement in the Summa Theologiae. Some commentators note a difference between Anselm and Thomas on the question of whether the Incarnation and Cross were necessary, or instead extremely fitting but not necessary. Indeed, it has been suggested that Thomas’s refusal to say that they were necessary enables him to include a diverse array of effects alongside satisfaction in a more natural way than Anselm does. Picking up this dispute, I attempt to give Anselm a partial defense, while ultimately proposing what I take to be a mediating position. One central contribution of my reinterpretation of Anselm here is that, even if Anselm himself was incorrect on the question of necessity (and I take it that he was), his satisfaction account in no way excludes other concepts or effects from our reflection on God’s work in Christ.
for our salvation. On the contrary, he provides an underlying logic according to which a
variety of effects can be seen as extremely appropriate—the logic of satisfaction.

Thomas’s more developed theology does indeed provide much material Anselm
leaves out—though this is perhaps best explained by differences in the structure, volume,
and purpose of Thomas’s writings from Anselm’s, rather than by Anselm’s search for
necessity. Even so, I draw on Thomas’s thought to supplement Anselm, especially since
Thomas’s writings contain the material for a more detailed account of how satisfaction
relates to the Christian life, growth into holiness, and friendship with God. I also note
Thomas’s mention of instances of literary or aesthetic fittingness in God’s chosen means
of working our salvation in Christ. In these cases, the point of these examples is to note
(by demonstration) the way that an Anselmian satisfaction account is susceptible to a
great deal of elaboration and addition.

With an account of atonement in view which is Anselmian, but nonetheless
expanded and elaborated from what appears in CDH itself, I turn in Chapter 5 to consider
a certain form of contemporary critique generally taken to apply to satisfaction accounts,
and perhaps to render them untenable. Specifically, I engage the sort of critique generated
by feminist and liberation-oriented theologians to the effect that satisfaction and similar
accounts of atonement are, properly understood, ideologically supportive of the abuse of
women and other forms of oppression. The idea is that by envisioning God as valuing
Christ’s undergoing of abuse and oppression, such accounts of atonement cannot avoid
implying that abuse and oppression are somehow valuable in and of themselves.
Moreover, these accounts motivate imitation of Christ’s willingness to suffer, and calls to
such imitation, which undermines the possibility of resistance and the pursuit of justice.
After sketching out this mode of critique and the inference that seems to be involved, I argue that on inspection it does not hold against the satisfaction account developed in the previous chapters. A satisfaction account does not imply that God values suffering per se, but rather the will towards a good end (indeed, towards justice) even in the face of suffering. To examine what a satisfaction account might actually entail in cases of injustice, I consider two cases: spousal abuse, and the call for reparations for slavery and its legacy in the U.S. What I hope to show is that a satisfaction account can indeed support calls for justice in such cases, precisely as a paradigm case where, instead of merely forbearing ongoing injustice and forgiving it, God opted to call the sinful party, humanity, to make things right (even as He provided them the means to do so). Attending to the details of how and why and under what conditions this was fitting put us in a position to see the way Christ’s work of atonement can illuminate what should happen in other cases of injustice. Among other things, this helps us to see that it is for the good of the wrongdoer that we might insist that he set things right before being accepted back, that the act of setting things right should be fitting to the particular wrong, and to the repair of the wrongdoer’s will. Moreover, this account ought to motivate us to work for justice, even if this leads us to suffering, because that is what Christ did. Overall, then, I argue that in cases of injustice, the natural way to apply the satisfaction account developed in this project would be to call for them to be set right through some concrete act, rather than to forgive them and leave it at that.

The goal of all of this is to develop an Anselmian satisfaction account of atonement and render it as plausible and attractive as possible. It is an account which is not an alternative to other traditional concepts attached to Christ’s saving work, but
which draws them together as parts of Christ’s work of satisfaction: setting right what was damaged and restoring humanity to the friendship to God for which it was intended. It is not that Christ makes satisfaction rather than defeating the devil, but that Christ defeats the devil precisely for the purpose of making satisfaction, offering to God the honor which Adam and Eve failed to offer Him when they were called to resist the devil. It is not that Christ makes satisfaction rather than providing a supremely effective moral example, but that Christ teaches us how to love God, above all, by making satisfaction. Indeed, everything Christ does is about bringing humanity to the state for which God intended it, the state where humanity ought to be but for the damage caused by sin.

Developing this reading of Anselm, revising it and expanding on it through engagement with Thomas, and then illustrating how it can illuminate cases of injustice rather than supporting further injustice, hopefully displays the virtues and the promise of such an account as a way to understand what it is we believe, a way to guide us forward on the path from faith to sight.
CHAPTER 2

THE ATONEMENT THEORY PARADIGM

For even the Fathers, because, ‘the days of men are short’, were not able to say all that they could have said if they had lived longer; and the logic of the truth is so copious and profound that it cannot be exhausted by mortals.

Saint Anselm of Canterbury, Cur Deus Homo, Commendatio

In his classic text, Cur Deus Homo (CDH), Anselm of Canterbury set out to understand the deep wisdom of the saving work of God in Christ. He did so, I will argue, by identifying an underlying logic according to which “all the things we believe about Christ”7 are intelligible together as profoundly fitting—even necessary—in light of the goodness of God and the reality of human sin. Anselm did not seek to develop a new doctrine of atonement, but to comprehend as precisely as possible the why of the doctrine already accepted and known in faith. He struck upon the concept of satisfaction as the conceptual fulcrum on which the whole thing turned. Satisfaction was not, for Anselm, an explanatory strategy opposed to saying Christ saved by defeating the devil or by his teaching and inspiring example of a life of love, but rather a lens through which those truths and more can be understood as exactly what was most fitting and even necessary—why God saved this way instead of by another route. This reading of Anselm will be

7 Anselm, Cur Deus Homo, Preface.
unpacked and defended below (in Chapter 3), but with this very brief sketch of where we are going in mind, we turn instead to the scene of contemporary atonement theology. How has Anselm’s project fared?

In the modern period, theologians writing on the doctrine of atonement have not generally followed Anselm, either in his material claims or in his methodology—though here I will focus on the latter point. Anselm’s project has mostly been abandoned, in one way or another. This point is important to notice, because the most typical way of telling the history of atonement theology makes Anselm the paradigm example and even the originator of the dominant way of framing the task of atonement theology. We shall see that it simply is not so. In this chapter, I will unpack the dominant approach to the doctrine atonement today, so that the way it diverges from Anselm’s project can be seen clearly. I will also observe various problems that arise from the dominant approach, problems we can avoid by returning to Anselm’s *fides quaerens intellectum* in the fullest sense.

Today, atonement theology is done, by and large, under what I am calling the atonement theory paradigm. The basic task of atonement theology is to explain how it is that the events of the Incarnation, life, teachings, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus constitute our salvation and reconciliation with God. Under the atonement theory paradigm, an atonement theory provides such an explanation. Each atonement theory tells a different story about the problem between God and humanity how that problem has been solved in Jesus Christ. The explanatory task usually involves applying concepts from some other arena to the events of Christ’s life in a sort of metaphor or model. The narrative of Christ’s saving work is retold with reference to
those concepts and their interrelationships so that the intelligibility of the relevant concepts in their natural home helps to lend intelligibility to the events of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, and specifically how those events constitute our salvation. Atonement theories are, under this paradigm, theories about what sort of act the atonement is.

Not only is atonement theology often carried out this way today, but the history of the doctrine is now typically understood in these terms. The history of atonement theology is thus the history of atonement theories—-theories about what the atonement is, or at least the inchoate beginnings of atonement theories. According to this way of thinking, the Christus Victor theory expressed or at least hinted at in the Fathers conceives of the atonement as a victory over oppressive forces. The ransom theory expressed in Gregory of Nyssa presents the atonement in terms of economic exchange (albeit one involving a bit of trickery): at the cross, Jesus offers himself to the devil in order to purchase our freedom, and the devil (foolishly) accepts. The moral exemplar theory of Peter Abelard presents atonement fundamentally as a matter of Christ’s example of love inspiring us to the same sort of love; the atonement is thus a kind of moral education. In each case, the concepts chosen render the story of atonement in Christ intelligible by presenting an account of what the atonement is, and each one is understood as discrete and distinct from the others. In the penal substitution theory, atonement involves Christ bearing our legal punishment, satisfying divine justice and therefore earning our acquittal—-atonement is thus a legal exchange.

By presenting different views of what the atonement is, atonement theories are understood most naturally as alternatives to one another. Framing the history of
atonement theology this way suggests, then, that either atonement is a victory over oppressive forces, or it is a payment rendered to the devil, or it is a legal judgment, etc., and the atonement theologian needs to show which is correct (or if none of these are correct, develop a new, correct theory). We will call this initial expression of the atonement theory paradigm the single-theory approach. By this label, we include any approach to the doctrine of atonement which selects a narrow slice of traditional teaching on atonement and rejects the rest. Alternatively, however, one might judge that what the atonement is not adequately captured by any of the alternatives on offer, though each one (or most of them, anyway) provide some window into the truth. According to this latter view, the project of atonement theology is not to pick out the theory we ought to believe, but instead to make use of an array theories in whatever way turns out to be appropriate for a given task.

It seems, then, that the atonement theologian has two possible choices: either select a single theory as the only or the primary way of understanding the atonement, or decide that several theories do the job better than one. This latter option--which, following Joel Green’s term, we will call the kaleidoscopic approach--appears as a sort of postmodern reaction to inadequacies of the single theory approach, as we will see in more detail below. The point I want to emphasize here, however, is that the kaleidoscopic approach accepts the central assumption of the atonement theory paradigm, i.e., that the various elements of traditional teaching on the atonement which are identified as discrete atonement theories are, if taken literally, alternatives to one another. This is why, for the kaleidoscopic theorist, they cannot or should not be unified into a coherent story--the various theories need to be kept separate but held in a sort of loose, non-literal way.
In the rest of this chapter, I will first consider two examples of the single-theory approach; I will then consider Mark Baker and Joel Green’s kaleidoscopic approach. I will observe the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, ultimately arguing that neither option can overcome its particular weaknesses. Indeed, I will argue that the only way to maintain the strengths and avoid the weaknesses of both alternatives is to reject the atonement theory paradigm altogether. I will conclude by examining Scot McKnight’s “golf bag” approach—this last option, I will argue, pushes beyond the atonement theory paradigm to something more like Anselm’s. These examples cannot by any means be exhaustive, but it is hoped they will be sufficiently illustrative with respect to the formal features of the atonement theory paradigm, its weaknesses, and the shape of an Anselmian alternative.  

**Single-Theory Approaches**

*Gustaf Aulén’s Christus Victor*

We can start our consideration of single-theory approaches with Gustaf Aulén’s book, *Christus Victor*. Aulén divides the landscape of atonement theology into three options: the objective, the subjective, and what he calls the “classic” idea of the
atonement; he treats these options as mutually exclusive even though he is aware that, often enough, a supposed exemplar of one view appears to express the other alternatives. As he admits, “points belonging properly to [the classical and the Latin views] often stand side by side without any apparent consciousness on the part of those who use them of their essential diversity.”

In any case, here is Aulén’s typology. On the classic view, God saves humanity from external forces, and the atonement is thus the work of God from start to finish. On the objective (“Latin”) view crystallized by Anselm, Christ saves humanity from God’s own justice; this view is modeled, Aulén recognizes, on the practice of penance. Humanity has to give something to God, and thus, on Aulén’s analysis, there is a sort of break in God’s activity in the process of the atonement. It is “as man” that Jesus makes an offering to God in order to satisfy justice, and so the atonement is no longer the work of God from start to finish. Alternatively, on the subjective view, which arises as a critique of the objective view, the atonement is not really an act of God at all. The important activity takes place entirely on the human side via a change within the human persons who are inspired by Christ’s example of love. As he slices up the conceptual territory, then, we can see that these three options appear to be jointly exhaustive and mutually exclusive: either the atonement is completely a divine act, or it is partially a divine and partially a human act, or it is completely a human act.

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10 Ibid., 38–39.
Arguably, however, this assumption of mutual incompatibility leads Aulén to mishandle his evidence. He denies, for example, that Augustine saw any “idea of an offering made to God from man’s side, from below.” But after a lengthy discourse on the nature of true sacrifice in *The City of God*, Augustine says that

Thus the true sacrifice is offered in every act which is designed to unite us to God in a holy fellowship, . . . the whole redeemed community, that is to say, the congregation and fellowship of the saints, is offered to God as a universal sacrifice, through the great Priest who offered himself in his suffering for us – so that we might be the body of so great a head – under ‘the form of a servant.’ For it was this form he offered, and in this form he was offered, because it is under this form that he is the Mediator, in this form he is the Priest, in this form he is the Sacrifice. . . .

This is the sacrifice of Christians, who are ‘many, making up one body in Christ.’ This is the sacrifice which the Church continually celebrates in the sacrament of the altar, a sacrament well-known to the faithful where it is shown to the Church that she herself is offered in the offering which she presents to God.

Augustine plainly envisions Christ as offering himself to God as a perfect offering to God “from below,” an offering that enables and catches up into itself the offerings of the faithful. Likewise, Aulén recognizes that Athanasius talks about a “debt of honor” that Christ pays to God alongside the idea that Christ overcomes death for us, but Aulén insists that

Athanasius is in no way forsaking the classic point of view; the payment of the debt is God’s own act, carried out by the Logos, while at the same time it is God who receives the payment. Least of all is it true to say that we have here anything like a rational theory of the Latin type, according to which satisfaction would be paid to God’s justice from man’s side, from below.

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11 Ibid., 46.


In these texts where Augustine and Athansius explicitly affirm that God, through the self-offering of Christ’s human nature, offers something to God which sets things right, Aulén detects a “double-sidedness” and rightly so; they are grappling with the fact that what Christ is done by one who is both human and divine. Hence it is true both that in Christ a man offers something to God and that God is the one making the offering. But Aulén fails to recognize that this very same double-sidedness is what is stake in the Latin tradition, and thus where Anselm includes themes Aulén identifies as belonging to the classic view Aulén must dismiss these inclusions as merely vestigial. For Aulén, because the three options in his typology are mutually exclusive, where actual theologians appear to violate that exclusivity, they are simply paying lip-service or else they just were not thinking clearly enough to recognize the contradiction. We will see, however, that at least in Anselm’s case, we have an attempt at integrating elements Aulén identifies as properly belonging to the classic and subjective ideas which already pushes beyond the typology. This signals plainly enough that, for Anselm, the atonement consists of a liberating defeat of the devil and a perfect human offering to God and an inspiring and illuminating example. And, indeed, Christ brings each of these actions to a climax in one act, namely his Passion.

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14 See, e.g., Ibid., 1–2: “By the theory of satisfaction developed in the Cur Deus homo? he repressed, even if he could not entirely overcome, the old mythological account of Christ’s work as a victory over the devil . . .” And later, Ibid., 89, he says, “. . . while it is true that he sometimes speaks of Christ’s work as a triumph over the devil, and connects this thought with the idea of satisfaction, this use of the old phraseology is purely accidental. It has no vital relation to the structure of his thought.” Aulén, however, provides little in the way of evidence that Anselm wished either to repress or to overcome the idea of Christ’s work as a victory over the devil, or that it plays no vital role in his thought. As we shall see in Chapter 3 attending to the logic of Anselm’s argument makes it more plausible to think that he intended understand the “old mythological account” of Christ’s work as a defeat of the devil and integrate it with other elements of the tradition rather than to repress or overcome it.
What, then, of Aulén’s conceptual scheme? As we have noted, the supposed incompatibility between the types has to do with God’s involvement in the process. It is true, let us grant, that either the atonement is only a divine work, only a human work, or a mixture of both divine and human work. And, we can suppose that Aulén would reply that any view that includes a human offering and/or the inspiration of human love as a necessary step would amount to a mixed view, involving what he calls a “break” in God’s activity. So, merely to observe that Anselm actually did mean in all seriousness that God (in Christ) defeated the Devil and inspired us to love and righteousness, does not really refute that for Anselm the atonement is a mix of divine and human activity rather than being exclusively a divine act.  

Aulén’s analysis will not, however, withstand metaphysical scrutiny, at least not from within a Chalcedonian Christology. According to Chalcedon, the Word is one divine person who possesses two natures, and actions are attributed not to the natures, but to the one divine person. Thus God was born of a virgin and died on a cross, and thus Mary is the theotokos, and thus Jesus Christ is God without whom nothing has been made that has been made.

It is true, of course, that creaturely actions such as birth and death are carried out by the Son in virtue of possessing a human nature, but this is equally true on either Aulén’s classic idea or the Latin idea. And, indeed, one of the chief tasks of patristic

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15 C.f. Aulén’s discussion in Ibid., 88. There, he suggests that Anselm “throws out the idea that Christ even pays satisfaction to His own Divine nature, he is saying, as clearly as words can express, that he is thinking of that which Christ accomplishes as man, of an offering made to God from man’s side, from below.” Anselm does indeed affirm that the Christ’s honoring of God is an honoring of the whole Trinity in CDH II.18. He also, however, claims that he has preserved the truth of saying that this is an offering from the Son to the Father. He is not denying, therefore, that the self-offering of Jesus is a self-offering of the Divine Word—it is an offering of the Word in virtue of his human nature. Satisfaction is still, therefore, a divine act, and it is by no means clear that Anselm means to affirm a division between what Christ does “as man” and what he does “as God.”
theologians like Athanasius (and likewise Anselm) was to show exactly why God opted to defeat the devil through creaturely acts like being born and dying—in other words, why it was fitting for God to become incarnate. So, even if we take the view that Christ saves only by defeating the Devil and not by any human offering to God, it would seem that, equally for the patristic writers (representatives of the classic idea) as for Anselm later, God saves by what Aulén would have to call a mixture of divine and human activity. Happily, however, given Chalcedonian Christology, we can affirm that even what Christ does in virtue of his human nature is still a divine act—the act, precisely, of the the Incarnate Word. Therefore, insofar as we are committed to Chalcedon, we can say that at least the “classic” and the “objective” ideas of the atonement both affirm the atonement to be a divine act from start to finish, and that Aulén has not given us a good reason to see these two options as incompatible.

Furthermore, we can see detrimental effects for the doctrine of atonement of using his approach. One observes that Aulén actually has a religious motivation for carving things up the way that he does, and that is his discomfort with the idea of penance. He recognizes (as other commentators often fail to do) that Anselm’s concept of satisfaction has its roots, not in feudal law, but in the practice of penance—a practice which he rejects as entirely legalistic.¹⁶ His rejection of anything much significant contributed to the atonement by Christ’s humanity aimed towards God appears closely tied to his rejection of any significant involvement in the human will in the process of appropriating the atonement. We can hold off for the moment on attending the specific way the human will (both Christ’s and the believer’s) is involved until we consider Anselm’s view in detail in

¹⁶ Ibid., 82–83.
Chapter 3—there, I will argue that Anselm’s view does not amount to legalistic works righteousness. But for now, we can notice that Aulén (insofar as he can be read as advocating for what he calls the classic idea) essentially cuts off the doctrine of atonement from one important way that it might be seen to tie into a life of repentance and holiness. In pressing for us to see the atonement as a work of God on behalf of human activity to the exclusion of any significant role for Christ’s humanity, he is quite intentionally excluding any significant role for the human will of the believer in appropriating or participating in Christ’s work. God simply reconciles humanity to himself by removing an external impediment; there is no sense that humanity must, from its end, voluntarily relate to God in the appropriate way.

The effect of Aulén’s single-theory approach, then, is to erase rich connections between the doctrine of atonement and other doctrinal loci. It becomes difficult to see how the doctrine of atonement connects to classical Christology (why does God need to become fully human in order to perform this act of reconciliation if Christ’s human will does not play a God-ward sort of role in the process?), to Biblical notions of sin as incurring a debt and of Christ’s death as an offering that cancels this debt (since Christ does not atone by an offering of his human life to God), or to our own participation in Christ’s sacrifice (why would we need to share in his sufferings, offer our own bodies as living sacrifices--indeed, why would need to be baptized into his death, and what bearing would that have on why we should no longer live in sin?). And, in general, I argue that single-theory approaches under the atonement theory paradigm will have this sort of effect—a detrimental one for systematic theology, for the intellectus fidei, and for the Church’s preaching. Reducing the doctrine of atonement to a single one of the traditional
elements now called atonement theories will make it harder to see and therefore harder to express the “luminous interconnections”\(^\text{17}\) between atonement and other doctrines. But we can see this more clearly by turning to another example.

*Kathryn Tanner’s Incarnational Approach*

In *Christ the Key*, Kathryn Tanner argues for an account of the atonement focused on the Incarnation, in which Christ saves by being the one in whom God is united to human nature. Like Aulén, Tanner frames the doctrine of Atonement in a way that sets various models opposed to one another, although somewhat less rigidly:

The disconcerting differences of opinion, and even outright conflict, among these models encourages efforts to construct typologies of their essential differences and establish criteria for their evaluation. The models differ, for example, on who is responsible for the crucifixion—the devil, human beings, God, or Jesus as the one consenting to his death and going willingly to it. They differ on who or what is changed via the cross: God (God’s wrath changed to mercy); human beings (our hate for God changed to love, our fear before God’s wrath changed to trust); or the whole situation (through the cross a new sort of relationship is set up between God and human beings). The models differ on the one effecting change: God brings it about or we do by following the way of obedience that Jesus models for us on the cross. Christ effects the change primarily through the powers of his humanity (for example, insofar as he is obedient), or through his divinity (in case God is battling the devil on the cross for the rights of jurisdiction over us). The models differ on whether the cross is an interruption of God’s relations with us or part of a continuous effort—for example, to win us back from the devil, or to express love for us in a way that will finally get through to us. And so on.\(^\text{18}\)

While Tanner implicitly seems to grant that not all of these options are exclusive (some, we can assume, she sees as mere “differences of opinion” and not “outright conflicts”), it is worth noting how few of these differences actually amount to

\(^{17}\) I borrow this felicitous phrase from Bruce D. Marshall, “Renewing Dogmatic Theology,” *First Things* 223 (May 2012): 40.

\(^{18}\) Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key*, Current Issues in Theology (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 249.
contradictions—and where they do, they often do so by presenting an option that caricatures the view it is meant to represent. For example, surely many (perhaps even all) who affirm that God is in some sense responsible for the crucifixion would also affirm that (in different senses) the devil, human beings, and Jesus are responsible. Perhaps there are some who affirm that God’s attitude changes in response to the Cross, but, as Scot McKnight notes, most defenders of penal substitution (the best candidate, perhaps, for a view on which God’s attitude is changed by the crucifixion) would say no such thing.¹⁹ And, as we shall see in Chapter 3, Anselm certainly would insist that God does not change, and that atonement by satisfaction is a consequence of the immutability of God’s good intentions. It is certainly possible to say that God brings about the relevant change and in a different sense we voluntarily participate in it via obedience. As we noted above related to Aulén, through the communication of idioms, it is possible to say that through Christ’s human will God overcomes the Devil and liberates us. And finally, it is plain that the Cross can be both part of a continuous effort (as indeed it must be if it is a divine action of an immutable God) and an interruption (e.g., perhaps it is the element of that continuous effort that finally succeeds in “getting through to us”).

Now, certainly, Tanner is right that these opinions do represent differences when those who hold them affirm one and also deny another (as they often do), even if it is also possible to affirm both. To note mere compatibility is perhaps not saying much—it is a first step, however, in dislodging the assumption that selecting one of these “models” is simply what the atonement theologian must do. By and large, it seems they are not

mutually exclusive, at least not in the bare elements by which theologians identify them. That being so, to the degree that each one has substantial support for its main elements from scripture and tradition, to the degree that each is embedded in the Church’s liturgical life, and to the degree that each one has its own persuasive reasons supporting it, there is actually good reason, all else being equal, to prefer an approach that can include as many of these elements as possible. And at least in this particular way, we can say that any single-theory approach must be sub-optimal. What is sub-optimal all else being equal may, of course, be the best alternative when all else is not equal. Even so, the single-theory advocate thus has to meet a high standard. She cannot simply show that her favored theory should be accepted, but also that the others should be rejected rather than retained alongside hers. Tanner, it should be said, certainly provides such arguments; I will try to show that they are not decisive against the satisfaction account I will develop. But the central point for the moment is that, on the whole, it will be preferable to avoid the single-theory option if possible.

Tanner’s positive proposal centers on the claim that “God wants to give us the fullness of God’s own life through the closest possible relationship with us as that comes to completion in Christ.”20 This central vision of incarnation thus serves as the “key” to understanding God’s intentions and actions in the world, including the atonement. Indeed, for Tanner,

Incarnation becomes the primary mechanism of atonement. Such a mechanism replaces altogether vicarious satisfaction and penal substitution, with their obvious problems from both feminist and non-feminist points of view; and

20 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, vii.
provides a different underpinning than usual for the *Christus Victor* and happy exchange models [emphasis mine].”\(^\text{21}\)

Salvation is achieved, therefore, simply (not to say immediately) by the union of the Word to a human nature in Jesus Christ. Union with God is the goal—it is what constitutes salvation—and the union of the divine and human in Jesus is also the means to achieve the goal. In talking about salvation this way, Tanner draws rich support from patristic theology. The Fathers certainly did talk about the Incarnation itself as saving, as communicating the divine life to human nature generally through the hypostatic union of the Word to a particular human nature. And insofar as she is right in saying that the Incarnation “drops out of modern accounts of the atonement,”\(^\text{22}\) Tanner has brought back in a crucial theological theme to a doctrine that sorely needs it.

On the other hand, one may question how much the atonement is actually explained by this model, and what other explanatory avenues it leaves out. Tanner distances her account from Platonic metaphysical assumptions (e.g., the existence of “humanity” as an ideal form) that might render salvation by incarnation more readily intelligible. She is right, of course, that in the Fathers “the saving efficacy of incarnation is not commonly explained by any technical philosophical means, but through the use of examples that are rather ‘homey’ and commonsensical even to modern ears.”\(^\text{23}\) But it seems plain enough that “homey examples” can themselves indicate or illuminate technical philosophical concepts. If we probe the meaning of the examples she cites, we may still be left puzzling over what mechanism is really at play if we opt not to appeal to

\(^\text{21}\) Ibid., 252.
\(^\text{22}\) Ibid., 258.
\(^\text{23}\) Ibid., 259.
Platonic notions of a universal human nature. Her representative examples are the way light overcomes darkness and the way wood catches fire by being brought near a flame. But what do these examples (metaphors, really) actually mean? How or why does God’s intimate union with humanity work in the way fire does with wood? In a rich passage, Tanner explains:

. . . in short; salvation is a form of temporal, historical process, involving struggle with the forces of sin and death, and the sort of changes that typify any human life, sinful or not.

To understand this, one must see the humanity that the Word assumes as an historical humanity, one that alters and grows. . . . And one must see it as a humanity needing to be changed because of the forces of sin and death afflicting it. There is consequently in Jesus’ life a passover, a genuine way or passage, from corruption to incorruption, from a life of suffering from sin to one free from its effects. Each moment of Jesus’ life as it happens is being brought into connection with the life-giving powers of the Word, and the reworking of each of them takes time. Jesus is not saved from death, therefore, until he dies and not saved from the terrible consequences of his rejection in a sinful world until he suffers them, at which time those aspects of Jesus’ human life are taken up by the Word and subject to a process of reworking through the powers of the Word.24

On this model, then, atonement involves a change through time, a transformation of human life from one sort (suffering from sin and death) to another (no longer suffering from sin and death). Christ, as the union of God and humanity, embodies this shift through his own life, as he undergoes the suffering brought on by sin (including death) but ultimately overcomes it through the transformative power of the Word. Over the life of Christ, the distance between humanity and God is overcome, and the consequences of this for all of humanity are themselves worked out in time; it is also a “temporal and historical process.”

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24 Ibid., 260–61.
How exactly does the temporal and historical process of salvation work? How, that is, does the change that the Word works over the life of Jesus effect the same change in the lives of other human persons? What is the mechanism by which this change spreads? To answer this question, we can attend to the way Tanner interprets Jesus’ death as sacrifice. On Tanner’s model, the cross does indeed play a climactic role in the process of atonement, even though she insists this role is an entirely negative one. Jesus’ death, in her terms, is an obstacle to his mission of atonement rather than its achievement, and it is overcome in the resurrection. Even so, Jesus’ death (as one event in his entire life, rather than precisely as his death) is sacrificial in that it establishes a new relation between God and humanity—and, unlike other sacrifices, it does so without maintaining any distance between God and humanity—at the cross, God takes on death and makes it his own, as a sort of culminating step in uniting himself to humanity. The cross tells us, then, that God is united to humanity even through death. The sacrifice of Jesus thus overcomes all need for sacrifices understood as human gifts to God for the maintenance of good relations, and instead reveals God as the one who gives gifts to us, especially the life of Jesus. The result is that

[p]utting those gifts to use for the good of themselves and others, human beings become living sacrifices. . . . [H]umans make a proper sacrifice in life-enhancing use, for the good of human life, of what God gives them in sacrifice—the life-enhancing powers of the Word. The direction of these living human sacrifices becomes in this way the same as God’s: toward the satisfaction of human needs, the reversal of the effects of sin on human life. Service to the neighbor becomes the reality designated by ‘sacrifices to God.’

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25 Ibid., 262–73.
26 Ibid., 272.
So, ultimately, it appears that the transformation in question is a moral and religious one following from an ontological reality. The life of Christ understood as the ultimate sacrifice teaches us something and inspires us to orient our lives in a certain way. That is, we learn that God has united humanity to himself and thus that we are already united to God (though this union has to work itself out in our lives over time) and we need no longer feel alienated or abandoned to death; we learn that we have no need to give anything at all to God to set things right, but instead that perfect humanity involves accepting and using the good gifts God has given in order to take care of ourselves and others. Indeed, for Tanner, “...God’s gifts are distributed to us—we are saved—just to the extent we are one with Christ in faith and love.”27 It seems, then, that Christ saves us by being the union of God and humanity and by revealing and inviting us into that union.

Tanner’s reflection here is commendable in redirecting atonement theology to its patristic roots in the Incarnation, as well as emphasizing the reality of union with God that Christ both is and reveals to and for the rest of humanity. Her account provides a deeply illuminating connection between classical Christology and the role of Christ as teacher and example. That is, the Incarnation was necessary both in order to enact and to reveal to us the fullness of intimacy and union that God intended between humanity and himself. This revelation unfolds over the whole of Jesus’ life, and it shows us not only that God intends this kind of union with humanity, but also what that unity consists of in a human life, and in this way it grounds—epistemically as well as ontologically—our own response of gratitude and our capacity to participate in that kind of life ourselves.

This, it seems to me, is one way to understand the underlying mechanic that make the atonement like a piece of wood catching fire by being brought near to a flame: the image of wood catching fire captures the way that Christ’s own nature communicates a new way of being and living to the rest of humanity—one completely in union with God. In this way, Tanner has beautifully drawn our attention to Christ’s entire life by the term incarnation, and thus to the significance of that entire life for atonement. Moreover, similar to Aulén, Tanner’s account captures very clearly the way that the atonement is not something that changes God’s mind but is rather the revelation and enactment of the utter consistency of God’s good intentions with respect to humanity.

On the other hand, the thesis I have been arguing is that any approach to atonement that cuts off major elements of the tradition (those elements ensconced in the theories or models to be rejected) will thereby be suboptimal. I have suggested that such approaches will leave something out that ought to be included, and thereby hinder our capacity to understand what we believe as fully as we could. Does this suggestion hold in Tanner’s case? I will argue that it does. Tanner rejects entirely any sense in which Christ achieves something vicariously for us—any sense that Christ does something instead of us—as well as any place for categories of law and of debt that often expound this sense of vicariousness. Along with this, she rejects any sense of the Passion itself as a positive achievement of Christ meriting a reward; it is simply an evil inflicted on him and overcome in the resurrection. As she says,

an incarnational account of the cross severely undercuts legal or contractual interpretations of the saving mechanism of the cross . . . God’s saving act does not follow Jesus’ obedience the way a reward follows good works. Nor does God’s
saving act follow Jesus’ self-sacrificial death in the way release from debtors’ prison follows the payment of a debt. 

We shall delay until later offering a response to her characterization of these alternatives, as well as her reasons for rejecting those categories (though we can note for the moment that, surely, sophisticated defenders of penal substitution or satisfaction would agree that God’s saving act does not merely follow Jesus’ obedience since Jesus’ obedience is itself part of God’s saving act). For now, let us merely consider whether anything significant has been lost by giving them up (however necessary such a rejection might seem). What do we lose, religiously and theologically, if we do as Tanner suggests and reject any sense in which Christ’s death is vicarious, fulfills a debt, or satisfies the requirements of law?

For one thing, the concept of sin as creating a debt to God is deeply and widely embedded in Christian scripture and tradition. This much can scarcely be contested. One might argue even so that the idea of creatures owing a debt to God has to be rejected, perhaps because it conflicts with other aspects of the Bible’s teaching or because it has problematic moral implications. Grappling with these sorts of difficulties, however, is a core task of the Christian theologian. As Bruce Marshall has rightly observed, the way into this task is not simply to select the side of the apparent conflict one prefers, but to struggle to understand both as true. At any rate, for the Christian who is committed to the God revealed in the Bible, a theology that preserves this pervasive Biblical theme

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28 Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 256.


will, all things being equal, be preferable to one that avoids the tension it might present with other important Biblical themes by simply rejecting it out of hand. A theology of the former variety will put us in a better position to appreciate the entire testimony of scripture about God as harmonious and beautiful, since we will not need to reject so much of it as inherently misleading.

At a more substantive level, the notion of sin as incurring a debt is tied to other important theological themes. It has to do, for instance, with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. If all that we have and are comes from God, then it follows that in a fundamental sense we *owe* God our very selves, and the proper response is gratitude and love. If we respond in a less fitting way, then we have not done with this gift as we ought. Indeed, that our response can be fitting or unfitting, proper or improper, is itself the basic idea of debt: that we should respond one way and not another. And to sin is simply to fail to do what we ought—to fail to pay this debt.

The idea of a debt to God is also tied to the idea of God as goodness itself. On this view, the conformity of our wills to the divine will just is the content of our debt, since that is what it is for our wills to be good: to respond to the gift of creation in a way that appropriately mirrors the goodness of the gift and of the Giver. To say that we owe God a debt, then, is not to appeal to a financial metaphor; rather, it is to identify God as the ontological basis of all of our moral obligations, financial or otherwise. That we can owe monetary debts to each other turns out to be a species of the fundamental debt we owe to God, since the fact that we should deal honestly with each other and pay each other back is itself grounded in the fact that we owe God everything we have and are, and so to treat each other justly (i.e., with appropriate respect to what God wills us to give to them, the
rights intrinsic to their God-given natures, etc.) is the only fitting response to that gift. It is only by being people who deal with each other truthfully and honestly, which includes paying our debts to one another, that our wills align with the divine will, and only in this way that our wills thus mirror the intent of God in creation.

Seen this way, the notion of debt is basic to a Christian moral metaphysics; it is actually difficult to see how one can maintain the intended moral force behind recommending any way of living without it. When Tanner observes, for instance, that God’s gift of the life of Christ to and for humanity leads us to use God’s gifts for our good and the good of others, presumably the implication is that one ought to put God’s good gifts to good use rather than bad use—this is the use one owes in virtue of having received God’s gifts. The notion of debt in this sense simply specifies this very ought-ness, and, therefore, denying that there is any debt to God undercuts the morally normative force attached to any such change, e.g., from using the gifts we have been given one way to using them another way. And in this way, for all that Tanner’s incarnational model does to illuminate descriptively the connection between incarnation, sacrifice, and changed human lives, by itself it cannot do much to account for the normative stance the Christian tradition attaches to this human response. It cannot account for the sense Christians have usually felt that they ought to respond in such and such way, and indeed that they always ought to have responded in this way, and that not acting in this way in the first place caused the problem which called forth God’s saving work in Jesus Christ in the specific form that it took.31

31 That is to say, even if the divine will to become Incarnate itself did not follow as a consequence of sin, the specific shape of the Christ’s life as a mission of salvation is called forth by our failure to respond to the gift of creation as we ought to have done.
Closely related to the idea of a debt to God, as these last comments suggest, are a few of other ideas: that we have failed to pay this debt, that we nonetheless need to pay it, and that Christ is the one who ultimately pays it on our behalf. These claims go quite a bit further than what I have argued here. To grant that as creatures we owe a fundamental debt to God in the sense that we ought to behave one way rather than another is not obviously to agree that when we fail to do what we ought we incur something like a persistent negative balance, or that in his atoning work (on the cross or elsewhere) Christ achieves the equivalent of paying off that balance. I will explicate and defend these claims in Anselmian terms in Chapter 3; for the moment, suffice it to observe that these too are deeply biblical and traditional ideas, and they often appear right next to the ideas of sacrifice, of the Word’s healing and perfecting of human nature through the incarnation, and of the defeat of death and the devil. See Colossians 2:13-15, for example:

And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

This text runs together several atonement themes—forgiveness, victory, debt-cancellation—and ties them to the Cross; the debt is canceled because it is nailed to the cross; the powers are disarmed when Christ triumphs over them by the cross. And Athanasius tells us that,

Whence, by offering unto death the body he himself had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from any stain, straightway he put away death from all his peers by the offering of an equivalent. For, being over all, the Word of God naturally by
offering his own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all satisfied the debt by his death.32

Athanasius ties sacrifice to both the defeat of death and the payment of a debt—and, indeed, an exchange of equivalent value. Many similar texts could be adduced. Anselm’s use of the concept of a debt of honor is often associated with his feudal context, but as a number of scholars have recently shown, there is an extensive biblical and patristic foundation for this idea (along with the related concept of satisfaction).33 Any model of atonement which is meant to stand alone, then, but also “severely undercuts legal or contractual interpretations of the saving mechanism of the cross” will thereby severely undercut much of the biblical and patristic tradition regarding the saving mechanism of the cross. Let us grant that if every possible “legal or contractual” account is as morally problematic as argued here, then such a route may be necessary, but a route that includes these biblical and traditional themes will otherwise be preferable.

Assessing Single-Theory Approaches

These two examples are enough to see what the basic problem will be with any single theory view—any view, that is, that selects a particular element (or even a narrow subset of elements) from the Church’s teaching on the atonement and rejects the rest. Any such view will fall short of the richness of the biblical and traditional witness. As we


have seen, this will tend to obscure the interconnection between the atonement and other doctrinal loci, and cut off conceptual resources the Church might otherwise put to good use in its proclamation and teaching. Moreover, since there is strong support in scripture, tradition, and liturgy for each of these main elements, admitting that one or more of them must be cut off and rejected may well lead to basic problems of coherence in the Church’s basic materials. This might not seem obviously troubling, but we should notice that admitting this sort of incoherence requires us to give up the assumption that what the Church teaches us to believe and say (in prayer, confession, worship, and preaching, about God and about Christ and about ourselves) ultimately does fit together beautifully and harmoniously. What is the hope, in this case, for faith seeking understanding? What is the end of loving God with our whole intellect if God’s self-revelation is self-contradictory, if only some parts of it are reliable guides to our speech and thought about God (which parts are reliable being left up to us to discern)?

A more theologically promising strategy, in light of all of this, will be to work under the assumption that God’s self-revelation through the Church’s basic catechetical materials—scripture, tradition, and liturgy—is indeed coherent. And what follows from this assumption vis-à-vis the atonement is this: if a way of speaking about the atonement is deeply entrenched in the Church’s basic materials then there is a way to understand it as true, as teaching us something about the work of Christ which we ought to affirm. To go further, let us assume that each such element will offer something which will indeed be a blessing to us, which will shape our intellects in conformity to the mind of Christ if we seek the way to affirm it, and without which the Church’s proclamation and teaching
will be lacking. Reasons such as these have motivated some theologians to push beyond single-theory approaches; we can consider examples of these now.

**Beyond Single-Theory Approaches**

*The Kaleidoscopic Approach*

The term “kaleidoscopic” comes from Joel Green and Mark Baker, who use it to describe the approach they advocate in their book, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*. A kaleidoscopic approach is one which refuses to boil down Christ’s saving work to a single theory, but rather holds an array of theories loosely together. Green and Baker argue for this approach in two ways. On the one hand, they argue from the multifaceted nature of the biblical witness with regard to Christ’s work. Indeed, Green and Baker are especially insightful and productive as they trace out some of the diverse concepts through with the New Testament writers apply to the work of Christ. They put the argument this way:

> In the New Testament, the saving effect of Jesus’ death is represented primarily through five constellations of images . . .: the court of law (e.g., justification), the world of commerce (e.g., redemption), personal relationships (e.g., reconciliation), worship (sacrifice) and the battleground (e.g., triumph over evil). Within these categories are clusters of terms, leading us to the conclusion that the significance of Jesus’ death could not be represented without remainder by any one concept or theory of metaphor.

> It is worth noting that Green and Baker share this basic premise with pre-modern approaches to understanding Christ’s work, including Anselm and Thomas Aquinas.

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35 Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 41.
Anselm and Aquinas were each committed to affirming that whatever scripture tells us about how the Cross saves is true. The task of the theologian was then to try to understand how they are true. In the *Summa Theologiae*, this is part of Thomas’s procedure when it comes to the atonement: he considers the various concepts he takes to be given in scripture and tradition and then explains how it is each one can correctly be said to apply to what Christ does, including merit, satisfaction, sacrifice, redemption, liberation, payment of debt, and reconciliation.\(^{36}\) While Anselm does find satisfaction to explain the necessity of atonement through the specific means of the Incarnation and Cross, his aim by appealing to satisfaction is to show that “everything we say” about Christ is true—and this “everything” certainly seems to include many of the elements usually identified (under the atonement theory paradigm) as distinct atonement theories. As Anselm so nicely put it, “the logic of the truth is so copious and profound that it cannot be exhausted by mortals”\(^{37}\)—this is his own justification for proceeding in his investigation even though the Fathers had already written so well on the matter.

Anselm and Aquinas (and other pre-modern names could be added here) thus agree fundamentally with this observation of Green and Baker over and against the single-theory theologians we considered above: the witness of scripture and tradition provides us with multiple ways of talking about Christ’s saving work, and the task of the theologian is, above all, to find a way to preserve them together rather than to select one and reject the others. Through this line of argument, the kaleidoscopic theorists are

\(^{36}\) See Thomas Aquinas, *ST* III. q48-49.

\(^{37}\) *CDH*, Commendatio.
pointing to a truth about the doctrine of atonement that a good deal of modern atonement theology has obscured, but which can be seen readily by attending to pre-modern sources. This point allows them to attend to the Biblical witness in a richer way than a single-theory approach can do, hearing the distinct voices and perspectives on the meaning of the death of Christ in remarkable ways.³⁸

In addition to this Biblical and traditional motivation for the kaleidoscopic view, however, Green and Baker have a set of pragmatic concerns which they argue are better addressed by a kaleidoscopic approach to atonement than by a single-theory approach. The argument here focuses on how a given model of atonement will function in some cultural or pastoral context. For Green and Baker, these models are fundamentally metaphors, and, “[m]etaphors work within cultures where a shared encyclopedia, or cultural narrative, can be assumed.”³⁹ Indeed, they suggest, “our use of the tradition frequently falters because . . . we attempt to carry over into our own lives and pronouncements models and metaphors that belong to another age and that are dead to us.”⁴⁰ So, by their lights, to be useful in some context, a model or metaphor of the atonement must be intelligible relative to the categories available in that context. They do want to insist on fidelity to scripture, and this means “embrac[ing] the ongoing relevance

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³⁸ Baker and Green, Recovering the Scandal of the Cross, 52–111. In these chapters, Green and Baker offer rich reflection on the diverse ways that different texts in the New Testament explicate the atonement. Attending to each voice as distinct allows them to draw out themes that are often missed by those too eager to reduce them to a single vision; one is struck, for instance, by the way they attend to the emphasis in Luke-Acts on the role of the Resurrection and Ascension in making salvation available to humanity without setting Luke against other texts that emphasize more explicitly the saving significance of Christ’s death (see Ibid, 90-101).

³⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁰ Ibid.
of their message, including their metaphors.”

Even so, they argue, “the models championed in the New Testament . . . may not (all) be suited to our day.”

Even the models and metaphors of scripture, then, may need to be adapted so as to fit the cultural and pastoral context of the theologian.

On the other hand, to communicate the Gospel effectively within a culture, a model must avoid simply confirming the cultural assumptions of that culture—the Gospel must be allowed to challenge and critique those assumptions where appropriate. For example, the view Green and Baker identify as the dominant one in contemporary American Christianity, which they call “penal satisfaction,” comes under heavy critique precisely for how well it fits with certain cultural assumptions of the modern West.

They articulate the tension they want to capture this way:

All statements, and therefore all theological statements, relate to, speak to and make themselves relevant to their own social environment. If, on the one hand, they do not, then they are likely to be dismissed as hopelessly abstract, unrealistic, impertinent, meaningless, artificial. If, on the other hand, their relationship with their social environment is too intimate, they are likely to be regarded as parochial, time bound and irrelevant to a wider audience. Moreover, they will lack the capacity to speak over against their social environment. They will be impotent to challenge the status quo.

Together, these twin pragmatic concerns (intelligibility to a given cultural context and ability to challenge that context) provide Baker and Green a core motivation for the kaleidoscopic approach; they imply that different cultural contexts (and even different

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41 Ibid., 125.
42 Ibid., 137.
43 Ibid., 42–45.
44 Ibid., 44.
individuals within a culture) will need different models of the atonement. And, since even those models found in scripture are relativized to context, fidelity to scripture cannot take the form of simply articulating and expositing the models found in scripture or tradition, let alone attempting to organize them systematically. Instead, for Baker and Green, fidelity takes the form of a generalized set of questions or “coordinates” derived by reflecting on what the New Testament authors were doing as they constructed the models they used for their own audiences. These include (1) sin as the human predicament, (2) God’s gracious action to save humanity from its predicament, (3) the human response of gratitude to this act, and (4) the universal significance of what God has done. These coordinates can then be applied for the development of new models and metaphors by the theologian who seeks to articulate the saving work of Christ in a new context: rather than simply expositing how the New Testament addresses these coordinates, the theologian should try to address them in ways that are like the way the New Testament authors did, but in models and metaphors which connect to her present context.

Taken together, the criteria of intelligibility and capacity for challenge plus the “coordinates” serve for Baker and Green as criteria for evaluating various models of atonement, both with respect to the contexts out of which they arose and with respect to the specific context of contemporary American Christianity. That is, for an atonement model to be successful, it must address all four coordinates in a way that is intelligible in its original context and yet maintains a recognizable fidelity to authoritative Christian sources. The questions for every model, traditional or new, will be: (1) How intelligible is it in its/our context? (2) How theologically adequate is its attempts to address the

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coordinates of sin/the human condition, God’s saving act in Christ, the human response to that saving act, and the universal significance of that act? To the extent that it receives positive answers to both questions, it should then be treated as a model to be used alongside others. To the extent that it receives a negative answer to either (1) or (2), Green and Baker seem to suggest, we have reason to set it aside.

This approach represents, it seems to me, a significant effort to follow out the implications of the contextual nature of theological discourse while still relying on the possibility of theological discourse to relate to a truth that transcends its context. The strategy we have traced above appears to be to tie the facts of historical context to a pragmatic aim—that of remaining a useful, intelligible model or metaphor in a given context—while letting epistemic criteria apply in a less contextually bound way. What we have here is in essence a pair of desiderata and a strategy of handling a conflict between them. That is, it seems that Green and Baker hold both of the following:

**Contextual Requirement**: If an atonement model involves cultural assumptions that are no longer widely shared, then we have a good reason to dismiss it from use regardless of the truth status of those assumptions.

**Epistemic Requirement**: If an atonement model involves claims that conflict with the teaching of Scripture—or even if it fails to challenge culturally shared

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46 Thus, for example, Baker and Green applaud Irenaeus and Gregory of Nyssa because their respective *Christus Victor* accounts “used thought forms of the day, like Platonic realism, but were not controlled by them,” while they nonetheless critique Gregory’s idea of a ransom paid to the devil as pushing for too complete an explanation, allowing “the logic of his metaphors to take him further than can be supported” in the way it attributes rights to Satan (Ibid., 149–50). They praise Anselm for interpreting the cross “with images easily intelligible to the people of his era,” but nonetheless insist that “he allows his experience of medieval life—its logic and conventional wisdom—to have an overwhelming influence in the shaping of his model of atonement” and ends up with a tyrannical view of God too much like a feudal lord and unlike the God of the Bible, Ibid., 156–7.

47 See, e.g., Ibid., 43: “First and centrally, we may ask to what degree the atonement model of penal satisfaction is faithful to the teaching of Scripture”—but I phrase it this way (“theological claim of higher epistemic status”) because the formal point is more general and could apply equally well if we also treat the Creeds and Decrees of Councils as providing claims of this status.
assumptions that conflict with these claims—we have a good reason to dismiss it from use regardless of how widely or easily it gains acceptance within a culture.

On examination, this arrangement is problematic. It is tempting to see the contextual requirement as simply about communicating effectively in a context. Maybe Baker and Green are simply saying that if a metaphor or model depends on concepts a person or culture does not know, then that person or culture will not understand the metaphor or model, and thus if we are trying to express some theological claim (a claim which in principle could be expressed one way or another), we need to find a way to express it in terms that the listener can understand. The requirement of contextual relevance then applies not to the truth or falsehood of substantial theological claims, but simply to their expression in certain terms. After all, Baker and Green cannot think that a lack of cultural currency makes an idea either false or incomprehensible; their own careful exegesis of scripture and their critique of contemporary views on the basis of it would then be impossible. They would thus surely grant that it is possible (if difficult) to come to understand an idea from outside of one’s own culture, and for such ideas to be true even when in conflict with widely accepted in one’s own culture. It simply takes some effort and training to work our way from things we do understand to things we do not—and since we cannot require everyone to become a historian or Biblical scholar to understand the Gospel, this means finding new modes of expression for ancient ideas.

Perhaps some would reject such a neat distinction between the meaning of a model and the metaphorical terms in which it is expressed—in practice, it can be extremely difficult to distill the meaning of some model or metaphor to an essence that can be translated to other terms. Indeed, as Janet Soskice has argued, the cognitive use of metaphors often involves suggesting a whole web of connections that cannot be
adequately captured by translation to literal speech.\textsuperscript{48} If we grant, however, that it may often be practically impossible to boil down the content of a metaphor to a literal meaning that can be translated without remainder, we may still affirm that in principle it remains possible. That is, it may be practically impossible to translate a metaphor neatly because it suggests more connections than one can practically list, or perhaps because the metaphor itself leaves open to interpretation exactly which suggested connections are being asserted, but it may still in principle be possible (with unlimited time and attention) to list them all and discern which are really central and which are peripheral in a given use. And if this is true, then at a practical level it will often be possible to express the most central facets of some complex metaphor via translation into other terms, even if such expressions fall short of being perfectly exhaustive.

On this interpretation, then, the contextual requirement really is distinct from any epistemic requirement; it is not fundamentally about the truth or falsehood of some claim, but rather the terms in which it is expressed. This means that for any given model or metaphor which expresses some theological claim, it is possible in principle to interpret what it means and then translate that meaning into another mode of expression. It is not clear to me whether Baker and Green would accept the interpretation I am proposing, but I would argue that something like this is necessary to maintain the coherence of their proposal. To see why, notice that for epistemic requirement to apply, there must be some claims from the teaching of scripture that are not themselves subject to the contextual requirement. Consider, for example, the objections offered by Green and Baker to what

they call the penal satisfaction account. According to them, penal satisfaction has achieved popular acceptance because it fits neatly with widely shared cultural assumptions (“individualism” and “obsession with mechanism”). These assumptions, however, conflict with Biblical teaching. We therefore have a case where the epistemic requirement should apply and penal satisfaction should be rejected. But if this is true, then, ipso facto, the aspects of Biblical teaching which are in conflict with penal satisfaction (e.g., let us suppose, a more communal understanding of sin and salvation and an allowance for mystery) do not meet the contextual requirement as they conflict with widely shared cultural assumptions.

How, then, can we explain this pair of criteria? It does not seem to be the case that atonement models are in some sense especially contextual compared to other theological claims (such as the teaching of scripture) which are not subject to the contextual requirement. Baker and Green argue, as we have noted, that an array of atonement models are themselves a part of the teaching of scripture (though they also say that if these models no longer have cultural resonance, then they may need to be set aside to meet the contextual requirement). Moreover, as we noted above, they assert that all theological statements are bound to meet the contextual requirement or else be discarded as irrelevant. It might seem, therefore, that no theological claims have a high enough

49 Baker and Green, Recovering the Scandal of the Cross, 41–45.

50 See, Ibid., 42–43. It should be said, however, that critiquing penal satisfaction this way shows a lack of charitable reading. For instance, one could argue that penal satisfaction does challenge individualistic assumptions, since after all it involves someone else bearing our punishment. Usually, this is understood to be possible because of a spiritual unity between Christ and his Body, the Church, which allows the communication of our guilt to Christ and the communication of his righteousness to us. Indeed, Reformed theology of this sort usually also pays a good deal of attention to a similar unity between humanity and Adam as in Romans 5. And, while the unity in question is often spelled out in a legal or forensic way, one can see that more organic models are deeply embedded here. All of this could well allow a theologian of the penal satisfaction model to challenge overly individualistic and mechanistic assumptions of modernity.
epistemic status to serve as a basis for the epistemic requirement. But this cannot be right, since Baker and Green do in fact appeal to some theological claims as if they have a high enough epistemic status to warrant holding those claims even when they conflict with the assumptions of the surrounding culture.

It must be, then, that there is a means of judging in any given case which requirement wins out. Conflict with widely shared assumptions gives a reason to set aside some theological claim as no longer helpful, but not always a decisive one; the more deeply embedded a teaching is in scripture, we might say, the more central it is to the Gospel, the more likely it may be that we should keep it in use despite conflict with widely shared cultural assumptions. This approach would leave us with some core of theological commitments which, for all intents and purposes, cannot be rejected even if they do not appear likely to communicate effectively within a culture. Presumably this is because we are confident enough of their truth and their status as constitutive elements of the Gospel that we simply cannot set them aside; we need to proclaim them whether or not they will be easily understood or accepted. It is on the basis of these claims that we would then decide that some cultural assumptions need to be challenged rather than accommodated in our theology of atonement. This proposal seems reasonable enough as far as it goes.

But, we may well ask, why should we set aside any claim we have good reason to accept as true just because it conflicts with prevailing cultural assumptions? For instance, let us say that Anselm’s account of the atonement relies on the assumption (readily available to him) that we all live in relationships with authorities over us, and these relationships entail obligations of loyalty and honor, and let us grant that in the modern
era this view is assumption is no longer widely shared. If we are considering whether to accept Anselm’s account or not, should we not ask whether in fact we stand in such relationships and have such obligations, rather than whether most people believe that we do? Because, if we in fact do stand in such relations, then a model of atonement that communicates this fact arguably ought to be preserved, precisely so that the faithful will not lose sight of this truth in a situation where the wider culture no longer embodies it. On the other hand, if such relations are entirely a product of our social organization—if they, and the obligations they entail, are only there if we experience them as such—then, even in a society that arranges itself in such a way, it will not be the case that we actually stand in such a relation to God, and the model of atonement will be false if it presents the atonement in a way that implies or assumes that we do. In such a case, why would the fact that the wider culture would readily accept the model provide any justification for its use?

It is at just this point that the distinction I have suggested between the meaning of a model and the terms in which it is expressed preserves Baker and Green’s proposal. If we can distinguish between what a model means and the terms in which it is expressed, we can say that whatever a model says that is true ought to be preserved even when changing contexts require a new expression. Their critique of Anselm then becomes a little more intelligible. We might imagine that what Baker and Green think is this: in Anselm’s world, certain a certain kind of social relationship existed between a lord and his subjects. This relationship had some features which are like the relation between God and humans, but other features which are not. In virtue of the former, appealing to this relationship as a model for the way humans relate to God in atonement has the virtue of
(truthfully) rendering the atonement intelligible; in virtue of the latter, it projects false
cultural assumptions onto God. It then seems natural enough to reject the metaphor once
those social relations no longer exist and those assumptions are no longer shared, since
whatever truth was contained in it can be preserved in some other way.

This interpretation of Green and Baker also has the benefit of making clear the
specific way Green and Baker are thinking about atonement models, which turn out to be
distinct from other kinds of theological claims. There must be such a distinction, because,
after all, if there is some class of theological claims that have sufficiently high epistemic
status to be a basis for challenging rather than accommodating to widely shared cultural
assumptions, why not atonement theories? If it is simply true, for example, that Christ
defeated the devil, then why should we not retain this theological claim even in a culture
that is negatively disposed towards the idea of military combat? If we exist in a
relationship of filial loyalty to God that requires us to honor him and to do our best to
rectify the wrong that we do when we fail to give him due honor, then should we not
retain an atonement model that expresses this truth, even in a culture that no longer is
inclined to believe in such relationships of obligation? It does not seem that Green and
Baker answer this question directly, but given the distinction we have articulated, we
might imagine that they think of atonement models or metaphors as more like ways of
expressing the truths of the Gospel than they are like substantial constitutive elements of
the Gospel. This would explain why atonement models may be set aside when they
cannot be received easily from within a culture: the truths contained in one model need
not be lost if the model is given up. They can instead be expressed in another, more
contextually appropriate way by another model or set of models.
This solution is, unfortunately, too neat. In practice, things are more complicated. Different models of atonement do not simply express the same truths in different terms. For instance, as Baker and Green note by the second of their four coordinates, different models often emphasize distinct (not to say contradictory) ways of thinking about the problem to be overcome in the atonement. Insofar as sin and its effects are multifarious, it is appropriate that we have different ways of talking about Christ’s work so as to display the way these effects are undone by him. And, as far as context, it seems appropriate to observe that different contexts (social, cultural, historical, philosophical, etc.) provide conditions under which the human problem will be experienced and understood in ways that are distinctive to each context. So, then, it will be beneficial to articulate Christ’s saving work in a way that shows Christ to ameliorate the human problem as experienced in each context.

On the other hand, to the extent that each different way of articulating the human problem is a true addition to our understanding of the effects of sin healed by Christ, just to that extent they will be true even in contexts that lack the concepts and experiences needed to see those effects clearly or easily. That is, if one of the effects of sin is that our intellects are darkened, then this will be true even for people and societies that consider themselves enlightened and are highly optimistic about the powers of the human intellect. If one of the effects of sin is that our wills are in bondage and need to be liberated, then this will be true even in societies that consider themselves to have achieved an idealized notion of freedom. If one of the effects of sin is that we inherit a debt to God that we cannot pay on our own, then this will be true even in societies that prefer to think moral
debts could never be inherited. In general, it seems it will be especially important to preserve models of atonement that express truths that the larger context will tend to neglect—in this way, the Church can help those shaped by its teaching, preaching, and liturgy to interpret their own experience of the human problem and of salvation from it in ways that go beyond what they could do by drawing from the surrounding culture. Surely this is what Baker and Green have in mind when they envision atonement models being capable of challenging the cultural assumptions of the context. Putting things this way allows us to see very clearly that what we are calling atonement models cannot be reduced to mere window dressing that can be changed to suit current trends. They include elemental theological commitments that are deeply embedded in the Christian tradition, and that need to be preserved even when they are culturally inconvenient.

It is worth noticing that a subtle elision happens when analyses of the doctrine of atonement shift from those elemental claims (think of the following: Christ saved by defeating the devil; Christ saves by his teaching and example; Christ saves by his offering of his life and death in faithfulness to God; Christ saves by canceling the debt of sin; Christ saves by bearing our punishment) to more sophisticated articulations and systematizations of them. It is plain enough that the latter can often be set aside and replaced with updated versions rather easily for reasons related to the contextual requirement (or even merely to justify the continued employment of theologians), but it is much less clear that a contextual argument can ever justify setting aside the former. Only

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51 There are important counterexamples. For instance, it is true that one of the effects of sin is that some people are placed unjustly into abject poverty, but it is not true that everyone experiences abject poverty. Still, it remains the case that there are poor people in every context, and if Christ teaches us the means to respond to poverty and gives us an eschatological hope of a community in which everyone has what they need to flourish, then this message needs to be preached even among those who never directly experience poverty.
an epistemic argument can do that— that is to say, an argument about what is true, not what is relevant. To put this conclusion another way, if God really has revealed himself and the significance of his saving act in Jesus Christ through the Church’s testimony handed on in its scriptures and tradition, then it seems appropriate to envision the task of the theologian (and the preacher) as finding a way to receive and communicate that tradition as effectively as possible in a given context, rather than simply lopping off whichever elements appear especially difficult to communicate.

Where does this leave us vis-à-vis Green and Baker’s proposal? I suggest that we should happily accept their argument that the tradition itself contains multiple metaphors and models for Christ’s atoning work, and thus that it will not do to select one and reject the rest. Furthermore, we ought to accept their suggestion that we ought to be open to creative attempts to understand and articulate the atonement in terms of new concepts generated by the distinctive perspectives of new cultures where the Gospel takes root. After all, we ought to remember with Anselm that “the Lord, whose promise is to be with the Church ‘until the end of the world,’ does not cease to bestow his gifts within it.”52 We have not, however, encountered a compelling contextual reason to reject a given element of traditional teaching on the atonement. The Church’s understanding of the faith will be richer and deeper if we can add to our understanding without taking away from it; perhaps in this way we may imagine that the Church is actually in progress from faith to understanding in the way Anselm envisioned.

Nor have we found a strong reason to avoid any attempt to systematize these various elements. Admittedly, no such attempt here below shall ever be final. All such

52 Anselm, *CDH*, Commendatio.
attempts are subject to the limitations of finitude. The Church must discern the value of any such contribution over time, and surely this will continue to involve debate, critique, and extensive development of competing interpretative traditions—as well, from time to time, as reexamination and retrieval of ideas once thought to be without value. We remain, in this life, partway between faith and the understanding for which we hope. Even so, an understanding the diverse elements of the work of God in Christ as parts of a single unified act—the supremely intelligible and beautiful act of the one God—has its proper place as the aim of the Church’s intellectual task vis-à-vis the doctrine of atonement.

This aim goes beyond what we can achieve. And yet, as an aim, it gives structure and form to our work. Among other things, it suggests that our task will include not only listing and elaborating the various pieces of what God has done in the atonement, but also organizing them into a coherent and systematic way so as to display their intrinsic unity as a single act—and, indeed, the intrinsic unity of this act with the rest of God’s actions towards creation. This, I suggest, is a way of understanding the task of atonement theology that does not fit either side of the atonement theory paradigm. And, I will argue in this next chapter, this is the most adequate way to develop that task of atonement theology exemplified by Anselm in CDH.

Scot McKnight’s Golf Bag Approach

At this point, we can consider another approach to atonement that attempts to embrace a diverse array of theories or models of atonement rather than selecting one, namely Scot McKnight’s “golf bag” approach. McKnight makes his own arguments against selecting a single theory in our theology of atonement, and in this way he
provides some support for a kaleidoscopic approach. On the other hand, in using the metaphor of a golf bag, McKnight insists on providing a more substantial unity to the array of theories to be included—indeed, as we will see, he allows one traditional theory to function as the “bag” while the rest are included as clubs contained within the bag. Ultimately, this is a suggestive way to avoid both single-theory and kaleidoscopic approaches—that is, a way to avoid treating the various theological claims from scripture and tradition which we now call atonement theories as if they are alternatives that cannot be fit together coherently.

McKnight begins with his golf club analogy, suggesting single-theory approaches to the doctrine of atonement are doing the equivalent of using only one club for the whole golf course. For McKnight, an account of the atonement articulates a vision of humanity, of the core problem for humanity (which goes under the label of “sin”), and of the corresponding solution to it in Jesus Christ. But, he observes, in different contexts people have much different experiences and ideas of what it is to be human and what the core problem with humanity is. And yet, he suggests, Christ provides a saving solution for people in all different contexts; we therefore need different ways of talking about atonement in order to account for how this is so—this argument is familiar enough from Baker and Green.

He elaborates the point in a distinct way, however. With respect to the concept of sin, he observes, “. . . there are real differences in the big epochs in history when it comes to perception of sin . . . atonement is a challenge because of the mind-numbing complexity of sin.”53 Sin, the argument seems to be, is multifarious in its effects, and it

53 McKnight, A Community Called Atonement, 48.
plays out differently in the lives of people living under different circumstances. If we understand sin in a way narrowly derived from a limited range of contexts experiences, we end up articulating the core problem of humanity (and the solution to that problem) in a way that excludes deeply harmful realities experienced by those whose voices are not included. As a result, our account of atonement will fail to make clear how Christ saves from those realities—the assumption being that he must do so if salvation is to be universal.

One might ask whether in the atonement Jesus simply provides whatever one happens to think one needs, or whether in fact scripture and tradition tell us something about what everyone in fact needs, whether or not they realize it? Indeed, at times, McKnight seems to veer towards the idea that the task of atonement theology is to provide an interpretation of the Gospel that will effectively appeal to people within some context, presumably by framing atonement as providing the solution to a commonly felt problem. For example, with respect to postmodern people, he says, “. . . defining sin as offending God . . . does not strike home because not only is the premodern premoral, he and she are also adrift from others—make the notion of an offense against Someone or someone doubly difficult for them.”\(^{54}\) But if postmodern people have in fact committed offenses against God, then would it not important to retain such a concept of sin, so that they will not miss out on an important truth because it is difficult? Thankfully, however, McKnight does not appear to present this scenario as an argument for setting aside accounts of atonement in terms of repairing a relationship damaged by an offense in

\(^{54}\) Ibid.
postmodern contexts. Instead, he seems to be arguing for retaining a wider set of concepts at the same time. Doing so will enable us to talk about atonement in ways that intelligible and compelling in a wide array of contexts, even if it also means retaining concepts that are less easily acceptable within any given context.

Ultimately, what McKnight concludes is not that we should set aside metaphors that are difficult for some context, but rather that “[o]ur grasp of atonement is partial, and something still yearning for yet more.”\(^{55}\) Although this point appears in a chapter with the title, “An Exercise in Postmodern Humility,” it marks a move back to an Anselmian way of thinking of the task of atonement theology—as we have noted, it serves as a key element in Anselm’s justification for his own contribution to atonement theology. For Anselm, in this life we are always on the way from accepting by faith the revealed truth of the atonement to the understanding of the atonement which the Blessed receive in the Beatific Vision, and this is why, he says, he can have something to add even though he is not, by and large, rejecting the teaching of the Fathers as he understood it. McKnight’s approach thus represents a step away from the atonement theory paradigm and towards the Anselmian approach we will develop in later chapters.

For McKnight, then, what the theologian must do is try to find a way to organize the diverse array of atonement models towards a coherent purpose. McKnight’s preferred metaphor of the golf bag signals a commitment to envisioning a unity to the diverse atonement metaphors he wants to include; this is an important difference between his approach and that described by Green and Baker. He sees his task as finding a bag which is capable of containing, ordering, and giving significance to each club:

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 49.
It is easy to be faithful to one biblical metaphor for the atonement—say ransom or justification—and work hard at making everything fit into that image. The difficult art of bricolage, of taking all the biblical images and combining them into an expression that manages to keep all of them in play at the same time, is much more demanding. To return to our image, we are in search of a bag in which all the clubs can fit.\textsuperscript{56}

We need an organizing concept, then, which will gather and order our other atonement concepts towards a specific purpose, analogous to the way the game of golf, applied to a specific course, serves as the purpose for the clubs. It is worth noting how McKnight explains this purpose. One might think that the purpose towards which our language about atonement is put is that of developing as full an understanding as possible of what God has accomplished in Christ for our salvation. And, it is clear enough already that McKnight envisions the task of understanding as a part of the purpose that motivates our inclusion of multiple ‘clubs’; McKnight wants different metaphors for atonement to be available so that we are able to understand how in Christ God has provided for salvation sin and its effects, complex and multifarious as they are. This is at least part of what is expressed by one of McKnight’s central questions for any atonement theology—does it show how atonement makes a difference?

On the other hand, however, sometimes McKnight slides from asking whether an atonement theology shows how Christ’s atoning work makes a difference to asking whether a given atonement theology itself makes a difference. A passage at the beginning of the book reveals this shift:

The challenge of the atonement is this: Does atonement work? Are Christians any better than anyone else in their relationship with God, self, others, and the world? Is there not a claim that atonement generates a multifaceted healing of the person

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 35.
so that Christians ought to love God and love others, so that Christians ought to be different? . . .

I teach a generation of students that believes the credibility of the Christian faith is determined by claiming a confident (if humble) “Yes!” to each of these questions. This generation is tired of an old-fashioned atonement theology that does not make a difference . . . They believe atonement ought to make a difference in the here and now [emphasis mine].

Or again, after developing a concept of systemic justice as a part of the aims of Christ’s saving work, McKnight says, “Any theory of atonement that does not have as its goal creating a society swimmingly happy in this kind of justice is not a biblical theory of atonement [emphasis mine].” Now, surely, McKnight is right to call for an atonement theology that illuminates our understanding of how Christ’s atoning work accomplishes what it does—how it makes a difference. But we should be clear about the distinction between atonement making a difference here and now and an atonement theology making the difference here and now, or between God’s saving work in Christ having as its goal a certain kind of justice and creaturely flourishing and our atonement theology having such justice as its goal. In the first case, Christ’s work, mediated through the means of grace available in through the Church, is what makes the difference, and the atonement theologian tries to understand how this is so. In the second, Christ’s work only makes the relevant difference if it is interpreted with the right kind of atonement theology.

Of course, these things cannot be separated too strictly—a good theology of atonement hopefully will not only describe effects already achieved but contribute to the fulfillment of those effects to some degree in the way it opens them up for us to understand. Indeed, if Anselm is right to characterize gains in understanding of Christ’s

57 Ibid., 2.
58 Ibid., 126.
work as themselves gifts of Christ to the Church, then perhaps good atonement theology can itself be part of the effects of Christ’s work: God saves us through Christ, enabling us by the Holy Spirit to reflect fruitfully on that work, drawing out and deepening our response of worship and gratitude, which is itself constitutive of our new, reconciled relationship to God achieved by the atonement. Still, however, we do well to be careful about the distinction between understanding and the object to be understood: atonement theology is aimed at understanding, and the atonement, Christ’s saving work, is the object we are trying to understand. The atonement theologian as such does not produce atonement, but rather seeks to understand atonement. Let us agree that a good understanding of atonement is itself a fruit of the atonement and even enhances our participation in a reconciled, atoned relationship to God; let us further hope that a good understanding of atonement better enables us to think about the just and peaceful relations God desires between human beings as a part of his purposes in atonement. Nonetheless, the proximate goal of atonement theology is not to produce atonement but to understand the atonement which God has already produced and is producing; understanding, then, will be the purpose towards which we organize our atonement concepts.

In any case, let us consider now the “bag” which McKnight argues can organize the array of “clubs” constituted by the various concepts applied to the atonement in scripture and tradition. McKnight identifies several concepts as needing to fit together: recapitulation, ransom, Christus Victor, satisfaction, substitution, and moral example; the “bag” turns out to be McKnight’s articulation of the recapitulation theory—as McKnight
puts it: “identification for incorporation.” He elaborates this phrase in a way that nicely displays how different traditional atonement concepts can be tied into a single narrative:

Jesus identifies with humans: ‘he had to become like his brothers and sisters.’ Jesus incorporates humans in his destruction of death and the devil and liberates those held captive by being a faithful high priest for them (representing them before God as priests do). Jesus identifies and makes possible incorporation because he ‘shared flesh and blood’ and because he became a ‘sacrifice of atonement’ . . . for the sins of humans. Which means that Jesus died for them, with them, and instead of them: their death became his so that his life might become theirs.

His act of atonement has a dual focus . . . identification in order to remove sins and victory in order to liberate those who are incorporated into him so that they can form the new community where God’s will is realized. . . . He identifies with us all the way down to death in order that we might be incorporated into him. To be incorporated ‘in Christ’ is not only a personal relationship with Jesus Christ but also a personal relationship with his people [emphasis in original].

This is a fine summary of several aspects of what Christ accomplishes, tying atonement both to incarnation and ecclesiology and including concepts of liberation, sacrifice, reconciliation, forgiveness, and representation. As McKnight sees it, “Every theory of atonement emerges from this central, life-giving identification for incorporation,” and “identification for incorporation embraces all the models of atonement.” It embraces ransom and Christus Victor as elaborations on the cost Christ pays in his identification as well as part of the goal he achieves, setting us free from captivity to sin, death, and the devil; satisfaction because Jesus identifies “with our sinful, God-dishonoring condition . . . and this . . . is in some sense a satisfaction of what God

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60 Ibid., 107–8.

61 Ibid., 109–10.
needs for God to be given proper glory; substitution because it allows that Christ accomplishes something for us which we could not do; example because it allows that inspiration by Christ’s example of love is part of what enables us to be moved to proper love of God and neighbor.

McKnight has nicely demonstrated the way that classic atonement theories are far from incompatible; they can form a fairly seamless unity. To be sure, doing so involves careful attention to the way they relate to one another and to other theological loci, but it is far from impossible. In addition, although he does not quite maintain clarity about what the goal of atonement theology ought to be, he nonetheless marks an important step beyond both the single-theory and kaleidoscopic approaches: he has attempted to affirm the diverse elements of teaching handed onto us by scripture and tradition about the meaning of the atonement, but also to understand them coherently together, as aspects of a single story.

But, although his idea of “identification for incorporation” is a helpful as a way of describing what Christ does and towards what purpose (and in a way that can mesh with various classical atonement concepts) we may wonder whether we can go deeper in our quest for understanding. In Anselm’s terms, we may still wonder if we can understand not just that God accomplished these things through the atoning work of Christ, but why he carried them out in just the way he did. It is this latter task at which Anselm’s great treatise was aimed—it largely takes for granted that Christ saved through a process of

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62 Ibid., 111. For the moment we can pass without much comment the idea that satisfaction is what God “needs”—whether nor to McKnight mean to say exactly this, it will become clear below that satisfaction as Anselm develops it does not provide something which God “needs” but rather what we need to give to him in order to fulfill God’s intentions in creating us.
identification with humanity (i.e., incarnation), and that this identification is aimed at incorporating human beings into union with God and with God’s people. What Anselm seeks to answer via the logic of satisfaction is why God chose this process for that purpose.

In the rest of this dissertation, my aim will be to explicate Anselm’s answer, develop an extension of Anselm’s answer by elaboration in terms provided by other thinkers, and defend the position I develop through this process from various critiques. This will not about to an objection to thinking of what Christ did in terms of recapitulation (or, if you like, identification for incorporation), though it will amount to a sustained argument that satisfaction provides a window into a deeper rationale that explains why this is what Christ did, and thus that satisfaction can function as an organizing principle in a deeper and more illuminating way—not in a way opposed to recapitulation, but in a way that explains the deep fittingness and necessity of recapitulation along with other specific acts Christ accomplished, such as defeating the devil, acting as an inspiring teacher and exemplar, offering a perfect sacrifice to God, offering himself as a ‘ransom,’ etc.

Assessing the Atonement Theory Paradigm

We are now in a position to sum up some weaknesses of the atonement theory paradigm—weaknesses which, it seems, are inherent to the paradigm itself, and not just specific to any particular example of it. The paradigm identifies a set of elemental theological claims about how Christ accomplishes our salvation (that liberates us from the devil by defeating him, that he offers himself as a sacrifice on our behalf, that he satisfies a debt of sin or of punishment, that he saves us by his teaching and example, that
he recapitulates God’s intentions for humanity through his life of faithfulness) as fundamentally a set of alternative theories about what the atonement is, despite the fact that all are deeply embedded in scripture and tradition. But since they are assumed to be alternatives, some theologians, as we see with Aulén and Tanner, select one or at least a rather narrow set of these claims and reject the others. In doing so, however, they will necessarily tend to be selective with biblical and patristic evidence, truncating the teaching handed on in scripture and tradition, and often closing off important connections between atonement and other doctrines. When faced with apparent tensions between some aspect of the atonement and another aspect, or with some other important doctrinal or moral truth, this approach resolves the tension by simply choosing one horn of the dilemma. But the intellectus fidei is better served by struggling faithfully with apparent tensions in the hopes of finding our way into a deeper understanding of what we believe.

Because of the testimony of scripture and tradition, and because of a recognition of the complex and multifaceted reality of the atonement, some contemporary theologians have rejected the single-theory approach. As we have seen with Baker and Green, some opt instead for a kaleidoscopic approach—one which accepts a diverse array of concepts as applying in some way to Christ’s atoning work, but without attempting to organize or order them systematically. This approach still accepts the fundamental assumption of the atonement theory paradigm, i.e. that these various concepts are essentially alternatives. Thus they can only be held together if they are accepted in a loose way, as something other than simply true. This approach has a difficulty, however, specifying why atonement theories in particular ought to be treated this way. It will be preferable, all things considered, if we can understand these various elements not as alternatives but as
complementary truths; striving for this sort of understanding is a much more promising way to plumb the depths of what we believe.

Scot McKnight has suggested an approach that pushes beyond the atonement theory paradigm, attempting to understand the major traditional concepts attached to the atonement as ordered to a common purpose. When it comes to identifying that purpose, like Baker and Green, McKnight emphasizes the pragmatic benefits of having multiple ways of talking about atonement for the purpose of expressing the Gospel in ways that are relevant to people in diverse contexts. Baker and Green use contextual concerns as a way to reject views that seem difficult to convey effectively in this or that context. As I argued above, however, if theological claims are true, they generally ought to be preserved as part of Christian teaching even when they are out of step with prevailing cultural assumptions. McKnight, in contrast, emphasizes the positive benefit without arguing that any traditional atonement concepts ought to be set aside if they do not appear to be relevant, and thus his position improves on Baker and Green’s; indeed, in this, he appears to push beyond the assumption that traditional atonement theories are fundamentally alternatives. Instead, his approach insists they can be understood harmoniously and in an ordered way.

Still, however, in insisting that atonement theology “make a difference,” he sometimes slips into the view that atonement theology is aimed at producing atonement. I have proposed instead that atonement theology be aimed at understanding atonement—that is, the atoning work of Christ. The understanding we are aiming for is a kind of participation in the atonement (namely by the intellect), and nourishes our response of love and praise of God—but even so, being clear about the goal of understanding allows
us to avoid confusing atonement theology for atonement, understanding for the object understood. Focusing on the goal of an atonement theology that makes a difference leaves McKnight at the level of organizing atonement concepts in order to say what Jesus does and how he does it (“identification for incorporation”). The goal of understanding, however, pushes us to the deeper question of why God chose to act in this specific way.

With this analysis of the atonement theory paradigm in view, in Chapter 3 we will turn to a re-reading of Anselm’s treatise, *Cur Deus Homo*. I will argue that in Anselm we are faced with a genuine alternative to the atonement theory paradigm—one which does not treat the elements of tradition we now associate with atonement theories as alternatives, but rather as elements of teaching to be drawn together so that we can understand them in a coherent and beautiful way, as one supremely beautiful and fitting act of the one God. Wrestling with the tensions between them thus becomes the most central and productive task for the atonement theologian; simply discarding one or the other of these elements simply abdicates the theologian’s task, as does the kaleidoscopic option of refusing to pursue a coherent and systematic understanding of them. Like McKnight, Anselm’s theology of atonement organizes several elemental theological claims as contributing to a single purpose; what distinguishes Anselm, however, is the rigor with which he sought to understand, not just the what and how of the atonement, but the why.
CHAPTER 3
ANSELM’S CUR DEUS HOMO

. . . [I]t is demonstrated with . . . clear logic and truth . . . that it is from necessity that all the things which we believe about Christ have come to pass.
Saint Anselm of Canterbury, Cur Deus Homo, Preface

In CDH, Anselm is often thought of as fitting neatly into the atonement theory paradigm we examined in the previous chapter. That is, he thought to have developed (perhaps for the first time in the history of theology) a distinctive theory of atonement: the satisfaction theory. As we have seen, according to the paradigm, this theory must be set against other alternatives as fundamentally an alternative to them, such as the ransom theory attributed to Gregory of Nyssa, the closely related Christus Victor theory, Irenaeus’ recapitulation theory, and the moral exemplar theory attached to Peter Abelard. There is, of course, some warrant for this view. Closer attention to the details of Anselm’s thought, however, reveals a complex and multifaceted account—an account that ultimately does not fit into the atonement theory paradigm. We shall see that the example of Anselm actually suggests that the atonement theory paradigm is fundamentally misleading, both as a way of reading the pre-modern history of atonement theology, and as a normative way of understanding the systematic and dogmatic task of atonement theology. Positively, Anselm’s approach turns out to be suggestive of another,
more felicitous way of thinking about the task of atonement theology, as well as a promising attempt to carry it out.

**CDH According to the Atonement Theory Paradigm**

In *CDH*, Anselm sets out to defend the fittingness and necessity of the incarnation and death of Jesus for the salvation of human beings. He argues this in essentially two steps that correspond to the two books that comprise the work: (1) without Christ, the salvation of humanity would be impossible, and (2) salvation is indeed possible through an agent who is both human and divine. He sets out to make demonstrate these claims by “clear logic” without assuming anything scripture says about Christ. In support of his thesis, Anselm makes several arguments that appeal to concepts of debt and satisfaction, particularly in order to explain why God could not simply forgive without requiring any satisfaction. Forgiving without either satisfaction or punishment, Anselm argues, is unfitting for the ruler of the universe: doing so leaves something about the universe unregulated. It would mean treating sin the same as righteousness, which does not accord with justice, and even seems to make sin subject to no law. So, sin cannot be forgiven without some recompense, and this recompense needs to be in proportional to the weight of the wrong done—indeed, it must include a gift over and above the damage done. In order to see what would be satisfactory, Anselm says, we must understand the nature of the wrong done by sin. He thinks of sin as a failure to give God what is due Him—it is, at

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64 Ibid., I.12.

65 Ibid., I.20.
least on the creaturely side, a violation of God’s honor. Anselm adds two further considerations: what we humans owe to God is everything we have and are—so we have nothing we do not already owe which we could offer as satisfaction. And, moreover, since the honor of God ought to be upheld over and against every other possible good, the weight of sin is greater than everything in the universe, or even an infinite number of universes.

So far, Anselm has established that humans cannot possibly make satisfaction by our own means, for whatever is offered as satisfaction must be un-owed, of greater weight than the weight of sin, and it must be offered by humanity. Thus it turns out that the only possible means for human salvation is an agent who is divine in order to have something to offer that meets the first two criteria, and on the other hand is human in order to meet the third. Given such an agent, what is it that can to be offered in order to make sufficient satisfaction for sin? The answer is voluntary faithfulness unto death. As a human being, Jesus owes love and faithfulness to God, but since He is without sin (even original sin), he does not owe death. Jesus’ offering of his own life in faithfulness to is thus supererogatory. Indeed, it is an infinitely valuable gift that is greater than the weight of human sin. Therefore, in order for humanity to be saved, the Incarnation and Cross are necessary for salvation. Furthermore, it would be unfitting for God to create humanity with a certain purpose in mind and then allow that purpose to go unfulfilled. Combine

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67 Ibid., I.21.
68 Ibid., II.6-8.
69 Ibid., II.10-11.
this with Anselm’s premise that we cannot attribute even the slightest unfittingness to God, and we have an argument that God necessarily will act to save humanity by such a means given the fact of human sin. At this point we have the basic elements of a satisfaction theory of atonement. All these elements are certainly present in CDH, and, moreover, he explicitly rejects another candidate atonement theory (albeit one apparently without a systematic exponent such as Anselm), namely the “ransom” theory in which Christ offers his life as payment to the devil in exchange for human beings. Given this as well as the tight logic by which Anselm proceeds, it is easy to conclude that he meant precisely to offer an innovative theory as an alternative to other existing theories.

This reading makes Anselm easy to place within the history of atonement theology, and, not unimportantly, it also fits him neatly into a number of theological conflicts. Anselm becomes a paradigm case of rationalizing the doctrine of atonement, either excessively or appropriately. He is to blame for placing the doctrine of atonement primarily in an impersonal, juridical context, or he is given credit for shifting towards an objective and moral account and away from the dramatic and mythical language of the patristic era. He thus embodies the core sins or virtues of the Western theological tradition over against the East, or of medieval theology over against patristic theology. The common thread here is that Anselm is interpreted as a decisive break with the earlier tradition in content and method. Without attempting to be comprehensive, it is worth noting some examples of how Anselm’s distinctiveness in the history of atonement theology has been characterized and critiqued along these lines before we turn to a fresh reading of CDH. What I hope to show here is a particular array of common criticisms of Anselm that appear in many modern and contemporary treatments of atonement—
criticisms which, it turns out, can be answered once we revise our understanding of Anselm’s relationship to the tradition he received.

Content

On this interpretive trajectory, Anselm’s chief contribution to the content of atonement theology is to envision atonement in terms of the payment of a debt of honor towards God in order to satisfy the demands of justice, where the patristic tradition had mainly thought of the atonement in terms of a military victory over oppressive spiritual forces, or healing of an internal corruption by a kind of contact or union with the divine, or a payment of an unjustly demanded ransom by the devil. While critical interpreters of Anselm have differed to some degree on the provenance of his central, load-bearing concepts, in general they have agreed that Anselm’s distinctive move is to develop a theory of atonement in terms of these concepts as opposed to other possible theories in terms of other concepts.

How should we interpret Anselm’s central concepts? In contemporary theology, it has been common (bordering on universal) among theologians writing on the doctrine of atonement to interpret CDH as fundamentally dependent on a feudal legal system. According to this system, a crime is understood primarily as an insult against the honor of one’s feudal lord, and satisfaction (which can be made by a third party instead of the one who committed the crime) must be made in order to avert the lord’s wrath. The conclusion which follows is usually that, whatever its merits might be (or might have been in his own day), Anselm’s theory is too intimately bound to a feudal context. By

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For a helpful summary and refutation of this view in light of recent scholarship, see Whidden III, “The Alleged Feudalism of Anselm’s Cur Deus Homo and the Benedictine Concepts of Obedience, Honor, and Order.”
itself, at least, it reduces God to a petulant ruler, and reduces the atonement to an impersonal transaction. It lacks any sense of a meaningful relationship between God and humanity, and thus it cannot adequately account for the human response of repentance.

In his own work on the atonement, which organizes atonement theories around the need to deal with both subjective and objective dimensions of atonement, Paul Fiddes expresses this mode of evaluating Anselm neatly:

The primary defect . . . is that both Calvin’s and Anselm’s theories are too ‘objective’, at the expense of the ‘subjective’ dimension in atonement. They portray atonement as a transaction, or legal settlement, between God the Father and God the Son in which we are not involved, despite being the erring sinners concerned. To suggest that our debt to justice is paid . . . by a gift of honour (Anselm) . . . certainly expresses the once-for-allness of the cross of Jesus. But it does not integrate the human response to God, and the healing of human personality here and now, into the act of atonement.

Of course theories of this kind add our response of repentance and trust as a second stage or appendix. . . . But it comes as a later appropriation of what has already been achieved, and misses the heart of atonement as the restoring of a relationship between persons, and as an event of reconciliation in which all estranged partners are involved. It is hard to see the relevance of human reaction to the atoning act if this is already complete.71

For Fiddes, the “defect” of Anselm’s theory thus has directly to do with its basis on a feudal legal model in which “justice had become a matter of the rights of the great overlords, [so that] any crime at all was an infringing of their personal honour.”72

Developing a theory of atonement along these lines reduces it to an impersonal transaction that does not meaningfully integrate human response and reconciliation to God.


72 Ibid., 97.
Mark Baker and Joel Green provide another example. Like Fiddes, they see Anselm’s alleged feudalism as both a positive and a negative of atonement theology. As we saw in the last chapter, their own scheme for organizing and evaluating atonement theories includes the requirement that an atonement theory should, on the one hand, speak intelligibly within its cultural context, and, on the other, challenge that context in light of the Gospel. Anselm thus provides a positive example because Anselm “sought to interpret the cross with images easily intelligible to the people of his era.” On the other hand, he also provides a negative example, for “[h]e does more than just use images and experiences from daily life to illustrate the atonement; he allows his experience of medieval life—its logic and its conventional wisdom—to have an overwhelming influence in the shaping of his model of the atonement.” The conventional feudal wisdom which, on this reading, overwhelmingly shaped Anselm’s reading of the atonement has detrimental results—in particular, Anselm’s account leaves out the importance of a restored relationship to God and a subsequent life of holiness:

Anselm’s focus on honor causes him to fall short of the relational understanding of sin . . . The emphasis on meeting the debt to the honor of the offended lord places little importance on the relationship itself and gives no attention to the impact a restored relationship with God will have on a person’s relationship to others.

The charge of feudalism is not necessary, however, to evaluate Anselm in this way. Thomas Noble, for example, finds similar flaws in Anselm’s theory, though he does not identify the origin of Anselm’s concepts as feudal. In fact, in his view, the distinctive

73 Baker and Green, Recovering the Scandal of the Cross, 156.
74 Ibid., 156–57.
75 Ibid., 157.
concepts Anselm applies are fundamentally Biblical. Even so, Noble interprets Anselm’s concepts of sin, honor, debt, and satisfaction as essentially legal and moral, as opposed to ontological, and in this way he too sees Anselm as representing a break with the Fathers. He comes to much the same conclusion as Fiddes, Baker, and Green:

It is true that the Anselmic view . . . shows the seriousness of sin as an objective reality. It is not just our attitude to God that separates us from him. . . . [S]in is not simply attitude: it is act. And the fact of our sinful acts is an objective barrier between us and God. . . . All that is part of Anselm’s valuable insight.

But where the Anselmic view is inadequate is that it fails to take account of an even deeper reality of sin, not just as acts or deeds, but as a condition of sinfulness. . . . The problem . . . as the Fathers saw . . . is ontological. Thus Anselm’s view of the atonement—while biblical, valuable, true, and necessary, as far as it goes—is not sufficient. It deals with the atonement entirely in external categories: the commercial model of debt and the legal model of acquittal.

. . . It focuses on the legal and moral dimension of the atonement, but misses the ontological aspect. And it does not seem to have anything to say about sin as a reality internal to us. In short, it provides no basis for sanctification.

Earlier modern readers of Anselm tended to associate Anselm’s concepts with the medieval penitential system. Adolf von Harnack wrote that Anselm developed his theory “by making the principles of the practice of penance the fundamental scheme of religion in general.” Harnack levels a Protestant critique, insisting that Anselm’s account does

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78 Adolf von Harnack, History of Dogma, trans. Neil Buchanan, vol. 6 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1958), 56. Harnack, of course, also thought of Anselm’s theory as essentially feudal: “And this brings us to the worst thing in Anselm’s theory: the mythological conception of God as the mighty private man, who is incensed at the injury done to His honour and does not forego His wrath till He has received an at least adequately great equivalent . . .” Ibid., 6:76.
not guarantee salvation to any particular sinner, but only demonstrates the possibility of their salvation if they participate in and live under grace. Therefore, it offers “no comfort whatever to any distressed conscience.” On this view, Anselm’s satisfaction theory certainly provides a kind of motivation to repent (to wit, to avoid hell), but, as the critics cited earlier agree, it provides no ontological ground or basis for repentance, no account of how a sinful will becomes a righteous one in the first place. In his influential treatment of Anselm, George Foley read Anselm’s theory in a similar way as grounding “[t]he notion of supererogatory and transferable merit and the custom of indulgences.” On Foley’s reading of Anselm, merit is completely transferable, and so Anselm’s limitation of Christ’s merit to those who actually imitate Christ is simply arbitrary, and thus he opens the way for the Church to claim to dispense that merit however it chooses. Foley thus agrees that Anselm’s theory offers no substantive connection between the atonement and the subjective Christian response of repentance (the kind of connection which he finds in patristic teaching, e.g. on deification). We can see, then, that an influential set of readers offer a common sort of critique, and that this critique involves the premise that Anselm’s theory of atonement is, in its content, essentially an alternative to the material found in the Fathers. Treated as an alternative, it is easy enough to locate relative weaknesses and strengths compared to the other possible choices.


81 Ibid., 18–19. Summarizing patristic teaching, he says, “The death, however, was looked upon as the necessary and effective means of our rescue from the bondage of corruption, and the resurrection as the condition of our participation in the divine life. . . . Again, the Incarnation was treated as the predestined mode of perfecting our nature and bringing us into full communion with God. Further, it was held that Christ renewed us by mystical union with Himself, and that the ‘deification’ of humanity was consequent upon the Incarnation of Deity.”
When it comes to his theological method, Anselm was both highly innovative and highly influential for the tradition of theorizing about the atonement which followed after him. Indeed, it is typical to suggest that genuine theorizing about the atonement began with him. How did he innovate? In searching for a proof of the necessity of the incarnation and atonement, he certainly seemed to aim at a higher standard of proof than he believed had been met before. Moreover, he sought to do so without appeal to scripture or any other traditional authority. Notably, for this specific task, he found certain traditional ways of describing the fittingness of the incarnation to be insufficient, although he did not reject them as false or without value; perhaps it is best to say that he judged it possible and desirable to press for a deeper explanation than they could offer, even if they were fine as far as it goes. It seems, then, that Anselm inaugurated a distinctly philosophical and abstract method of reasoning about the work of God in Christ, where before there had been more comfort with pictorial and metaphorical expression.

It is probably difficult to find anyone who has followed this aspect of Anselm’s method very closely; the later medieval scholastics certainly did not set aside appeals to scripture in their own treatments of atonement and satisfaction. And, as will observe in more detail in the next chapter, the tradition immediately following him almost uniformly rejected his notion that the particular way God acted for salvation was necessary, opting

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82 Foley is certainly representative when he characterizes the “form” of Anselm’s theory as “formal, exact, reducible to a series of syllogisms, and thus in complete contrast to the varied, metaphorical, unsystematic method of the New Testament” and likewise of the Fathers, whose “Independent, fresh thought gave way to deductive proofs,” Ibid., 115–16.
instead to show that it is extremely fitting, though God could have chosen another way. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the level of conceptual rigor he applied to his analysis was highly influential for the Western scholastic tradition. For his modern and contemporary critics, however, Anselm’s commitment to rendering the doctrine of atonement as rational by the most rigorous standards available to him mark an unfortunate departure from the more dramatic and ‘mythic’ style of the Fathers. As David Bentley Hart observes,

> For Harnack, as for Albrecht Ritschl before him, Anselm’s significance resided in precisely this perceived bare linearity of his thought; for both, Anselm was something genuinely new, a theologian who formulated a ‘theory of atonement,’ as distinct from the simple ‘schemes of salvation’ characteristic of Greek patristic thought.  

Indeed, Harnack saw Anselm’s method as something new and quite dangerous, profoundly arrogant, and even childish:

> In many passages, and these, too, the most important, Anselm proceeds according to a logic by which already everything can be proved. The gravest malpractices of Scholasticism already betray themselves in him; the self-restraint of the ancient thinkers, modest as was the expression given to it by the Fathers, is wanting to him. Everything is conceived of quite abstractly, very much in the way in which a clever child thinks and speaks of such things.

This is an important critique; in his search for logical necessity, Anselm truly does push for a level of understanding that perhaps we cannot rightly take ourselves to have in this life; perhaps he even unduly diminishes the scope of divine freedom as well as the gratuity of grace. We well take these latter two critiques up in the next chapter. Here, however, with a more comprehensive and charitable reading of Anselm in view, we will

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be able to see that even if Anselm pushes too far in aiming for necessity, this goal nonetheless allows him to gain a great deal in terms of understanding—and more specifically, in understanding what is handed on in the patristic tradition. It enabled him to develop an account that draws together a great deal of that tradition into a coherent account. This, I will argue, is a result we can retain, even if we depart from Anselm in terms of certain aspects of the methodology that got him there.

Towards an Alternative Reading of CDH

This particular cluster of charges against both the content and method of Anselm’s theology of the atonement is intimately tied to the atonement theory paradigm. It is tied, that is, to the notion that Anselm offers us a theory of atonement that is at the most basic conceptual level an alternative to other items on the list of atonement theories, the most relevant alternatives being Christus Victor, recapitulation, and moral exemplar. Under this paradigm, the possible conclusions are that Anselm’s theory is true, that it is false, or that it is insufficient alone but to some degree or other warrants a place alongside others in the kaleidoscope. Fiddes finds it ultimately inadequate because it emphasizes the objective at the expense of the subjective element of atonement. Harnack thinks it a useful development in some respects but ultimately untenable, and Aulén thinks it inferior to what he identifies as the “classic” view—the one to which he seems to advocate as the genuinely Christian alternative. Green and Baker, taking the kaleidoscopic option, nonetheless see very little ongoing positive value in Anselm, whereas Noble thinks it insufficient on its own but nonetheless indispensable. All appear to be in agreement that Anselm’s theory fits into the atonement theory paradigm.
A fresh reading of *CDH*—one that attends to Anselm’s wider theological project and its deep and self-conscious continuity with the earlier tradition—will show that he does not put forth satisfaction as an alternative to other elements of the tradition. Instead, for Anselm, satisfaction will turn out to be a way of organizing all of these elements together conceptually so that their profound fittingness and necessity can be understood and appreciated. The continuity this reading uncovers will also undermine many of the charges leveled against Anselm above. Once we see what Anselm is up to vis-à-vis other elements of atonement theology from the tradition, we can leverage those other elements to address the weaknesses Anselm’s theory seems to have when interpreted as a single theory opposed to those other elements. With his continuity with the Fathers in view, it is easier to see that Anselm’s account is not (for example) juridical and legal instead of ontological or personal. In fact, read carefully, Anselm goes a great way towards a theory that is at illuminates these various pieces hang together, and, indeed, how they cannot be understood fully unless they are understood together.

We can begin our move from presenting the common reading of Anselm to a fresh interpretation of Anselm himself by noticing that in order to present Anselm’s theology of atonement as fitting within the atonement theory paradigm—and as marking a fundamental break with the Fathers in both content and method—the elements that make it up have been extracted and set together in a certain way, “denuded of every nuance and ambiguity that enriches the text from which it is drawn.”

While it has to be granted that those elements really are there in Anselm’s text, a great deal of what Anselm himself thought worth saying (most notably the lengthy discourses on the angels and the

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divinely appointed number of the elect) has been neglected in this and many other summaries of \textit{CDH}.

To remedy this, I first offer a sketch of some relevant theological background from Anselm’s earlier writings. This is crucial for understanding \textit{CDH}; as George Huntston Williams observed, “Precisely because the \textit{Cur Deus Homo} is programmatically rationalist with allusions to Christian revelation reduced to a minimum . . . we must therefore also bring in the related writings of Anselm.”\textsuperscript{86} Then, with this context in view, I draw attention to several points in the \textit{CDH} not adequately accounted for in the reading I have described above. In particular, I note the way Anselm understands his own project in relation to the Fathers, his inclusion of elements normally associated with other theories of atonement, and the larger metaphysical and teleological context within which Anselm sets his vision of salvation. Together, these suggest that Anselm has actually presented a much richer vision of the work of Christ that is usually appreciated, one that is deeply continuous with the patristic tradition. These pieces of evidence support the view that Anselm’s concepts are not best understood as originating in an imagined feudal context, but instead have a rich theological background. Once that background is in view, we will be in a position to offer a fresh evaluation of Anselm’s contribution to the doctrine of atonement.

\textbf{Theological Background to \textit{CDH}}

As we have seen in Chapter 2, many critics of satisfaction and related accounts of atonement find them to have problematic theological implications. For instance, some

\textsuperscript{86} George Huntston Williams, “The Sacramental Presuppositions of Anselm’s ‘Cur Deus Homo,’” \textit{Church History} 26, no. 3 (1957): 253.
find that satisfaction accounts imply that Christ’s self-offering changes God’s attitude towards humanity, implying a division in the divine will between God the Father and God the Son, or a division between God’s mercy and His justice (with His justice constraining His mercy). It is worth asking, then, about Anselm’s doctrine of God, and how he took it to conflict or cohere with what he wrote about the atonement. Before our direct consideration of CDH, we pause then to unpack some of the relevant theological background found in Anselm’s other writings. Attempting to read CDH as coherent with what we find here will be crucial for developing a better reading of CDH and answering various critiques of satisfaction accounts of atonement. We will briefly note some important features of Anselm’s understanding of the divine nature, his understanding of the Word (the Second Person of the Trinity), and his understanding of rational creatures.

The Divine Nature

In the Monologion and the Proslogion, Anselm reflects in some detail on the nature of God; we shall see that although he is creative, he is committed to a deeply classical Trinitarian theism. The first of these two great treatises considers God as the supreme substance or nature, which he describes this way: “Of all the things that exist, there is one nature that is supreme. It alone is self-sufficient in its eternal happiness, yet through its all-powerful goodness it creates and gives all other things their very existence and their goodness.” Anselm then attempts to guide the reader through “a kind of model meditation” whereby one who has never heard of the supreme nature could come to know about it through reason.

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87 Anselm, Monologion, 1.
Anselm reasons to the existence of the supreme nature from the fact that that things have goodness not through themselves but through some one thing through which they are all good. That through which they are good must be good through itself. “The one thing, therefore, that is good through itself is the one thing that is supremely good.”

In addition to goodness, Anselm argues, this one nature is that through which all things have existence, and it is the one thing that exists through itself; that it creates whatever else exists from nothing and not from existing material; that its existence is entirely unique; that it not only good and existent through itself but also is justice, wisdom, beauty, truth, and other similar terms (whatever it is unqualifiedly better to be than not to be); and yet it is simple rather than a composite; it is eternal and timeless, omnipresent, and free from constraint by anything it has made (which is to say anything at all outside of itself); it is immutable in its being; and that it is one individual substance best characterized as a spirit.

Though we have left a great deal of interesting detail aside, we have here enough to recognize that Anselm held (and reflected on with a great deal of rigor) a deeply classical understanding of God. Amid this welter of relatively familiar classical divine attributes and Anselm’s own distinctive analyses of them, two issues around the divine nature are of particular importance as background for CDH, and the both relate to the way Anselm understood divine simplicity: first, his attempts to reconcile the qualities of justice and mercy, and second, the way he connected truth and justice.

88 Ibid.
89 Ibid, 3-4, 6-8, 15-17, 18-22, 25, 26-27.
In the *Proslogion*, Anselm famously attempts to improve on the *Monologion* by demonstrating God’s existence and attributes without appeal to the evidence of created things; he does this through the concept of God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived”—one notes the kernel of this notion already in the *Monologion*’s claim that since the supreme nature is supreme goodness, it must be whatever it is unqualifiedly better to be than not be. In essence, Anselm proceeds by considering each putative divine attribute (starting with real existence) and showing that if a being were thought of as lacking that attribute then it could be thought of as greater by adding that attribute. So, if one conceives of a being as not really existing, or as not just, or not eternal, and so on, one could conceive of a greater being by adding real existence, justice, eternality, and so on. Thus, the being conceived of is not that than which nothing greater can be conceived, and therefore it is not God. In this way, the argument leads to the conclusion that God exists and possesses these various attributes necessarily, as a result of the very concept of God.

In this context, Anselm pauses to consider a potential difficulty. Justice and mercy are both qualities which, it seems, it is better to possess than not. But if justice is giving to each one his due, and mercy is precisely to refrain from giving to sinners their due punishment, how can God be both supremely just and supremely merciful? It would seem that even though it is good to be just and good to be merciful, God cannot be thought of as both. It is helpful to see how the force of this objection is intensified by Anselm’s formulation of divine simplicity from the *Monologion*. There, Anselm says, “Since the supreme nature is not composite at all, and yet really is all those good things, it is necessary that all those good things are not many, but one. So any one of them is the
same thing as all of them (the same thing as all together and as each individually).”

God is thus for Anselm the single and completely simple ground of what are to us different goods which sometimes even appear to be opposed. But if the dilemma holds, God could not be the one simple and supreme ground of all the various kinds of goodness. God would either be supremely just or supremely merciful. Absent such a commitment to simplicity, one might suppose that answering the problem only requires showing that justice and mercy do not directly conflict with one another. But, given simplicity, we can see why Anselm struggles to discover a deeper unity between mercy and justice:

How then, O good God, good to the good and to the wicked, how do you save the wicked if this is not just and You do not do anything which is not just? Or, since your goodness is beyond comprehension, is this hidden in the inaccessible light in which You dwell? Truly in the deepest and most secret place of Your goodness is hidden the source whence the stream of Your mercy flows. For though You are all-just and supremely just You are, however—precisely because You are all-just and supremely just—also beneficent to the wicked. . .

For even if it be difficult to understand how Your mercy is not apart from Your justice, it is, however, necessary to believe that it is not in any way opposed to justice, for it derives from goodness which is naught apart from justice, which indeed really coincides with justice. Truly, if You are merciful because You are supremely good, and if You are supremely good only in so far as you are supremely just, truly then You are merciful precisely because You are supremely just.

Perhaps we cannot understand how justice and mercy are one, but it must be the case that in reality they are. A finally adequate understanding would show not just that God is merciful and just, but also that God is merciful because just. In the *Proslogion*, he goes some way towards this kind of understanding, and he does so through two steps. First, he observes that mercy is an effect seen from the point of view of creatures. When

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90 Anselm, *Monologion*, 17.
God refrains from punishing, the effect is like when a human judge refrains from punishing out of a feeling of compassion, even though God’s choice not to punish is not brought on by any such emotion.\textsuperscript{92} Second, even though He is not moved by such an emotion, God refrains from giving (some of) the wicked what they deserve according to their merits—and He does so out if justice to Himself; it is God’s justice to Himself that motivates His mercy to human beings. But how is being merciful God’s justice to Himself? Along the lines of the central \textit{Proslogion} argument, Anselm reasons that if God were “good only by way of retribution and not by way of forgiveness, and if [He] made to be good only those not yet good, and not also the wicked”\textsuperscript{93} then He would not be that than which a greater cannot be conceived. A being who cannot make bad people good is not as great as one who can do so. So, it befits God’s own goodness to be merciful, and thus,

when You punish the wicked it is just, since it agrees with their merits; however, when You spare the wicked it is just, not because of their merits but because it is befitting to Your goodness. For in sparing the wicked You are just in relation to Yourself and not in relation to us, even as You are merciful in relation to us and not in relation to Yourself.\textsuperscript{94}

Anselm’s answer here is certainly not without its difficulties. He has given a motivation for God to overlook sins, namely the fact that it is good to be merciful, and thus it is just to God’s own supremely good nature that He might express His goodness both through punishing and forgiving. And, He argues that since God is justice itself, if God wills to forgive a person, it cannot be unjust for that person to be forgiven. Still, he has not yet given much insight into how it is that God is also just with respect to the

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 8.
\item\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 9.
\item\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 10.
\end{itemize}
merits of sinners in His acts of mercy—this is a question that he is able to address when he ties it to the Incarnation and Cross of Christ in CDH. But the idea that God’s mercy can be understood as coming from His justice to himself will, I argue, remain consistent in the later treatise.

There is an additional difficulty with the Proslogion answer: it appears to raise the question of whether God needs sinners to punish and forgive in order to do justice to His supreme goodness and power. For if, as Anselm argues, a being who punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous is better than one who only does the latter, and a being who makes sinners righteous as well as making righteous those who simply were not yet righteous is better than one who only does the latter, then it might seem to follow that God would not be the supreme being in a world without sinners. Perhaps the Proslogion argument can be rescued from this objection by adding the qualification: “Given that there are sinners, then a being who punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous is greater than one who only does the latter,” and “Given that there are sinners, then a being who makes sinners righteous is greater than one who does not.” Still, one might ask whether, given sinners, it cannot be open to God to save all of them? Quite apart from whether it is possible for God to insure that all are saved, Anselm’s reasoning in the Proslogion might imply that God’s goodness and justice would not be fully supreme if, given that there are sinners, He did not punish some of them. I will argue that in CDH Anselm provides an explanation of how God’s mercy is just to Himself that clearly does not entail that God needs there to be sinners, or that He needs some sinners to be finally punished in order to be the supremely good and just one. What we will retain, however, is the basic theological framework developed here: God is justice itself and goodness itself;
if it is good to be merciful, then goodness and mercy and justice must ultimately cohere and even coincide in God’s action; and finally, God’s mercy towards sinners is in part a matter of God’s justice towards Himself.

*The Word*

We turn now to Anselm’s account of the relationship between supreme nature and its Word. Anselm’s Christology links the doctrines of creation and redemption in a way that is recognizably patristic, and provides crucial metaphysical and theological background music for his atonement theology in *CDH*; attending to it in some detail will motivate our attempt to interpret Anselm’s doctrine of atonement as deeply continuous with the patristic tradition, and even provide some basic language in which to do so.

In the *Monologion*, the Second Person of the Trinity is discussed most extensively as the supreme nature’s *locutio*, its inner word or utterance. But this *locutio* appears first with reference to creatures. Anselm wants to clarify the sense in which creatures are and are not created from nothing: creatures came from nothing in the sense that before their creation they lacked real existence, but,

before all things existed, the manner, features, and fact of their future existence already existed, in the reasoning of the supreme nature. On the one hand, then, before being made, what was made was . . . nothing . . . Yet on the other hand, it was not nothing as far as the reason [*ratio*] of the maker was concerned.\(^9^5\)

The way in which the forms of creatures are present in the divine *ratio*, Anselm says, is like a craftsman’s inner mental conception of what he is going to make. This inner conception Anselm thinks of as a kind of inward utterance or verbalization. This concept of inner verbalization is important for understanding how Anselm thinks of the Second

Person, and so his explanation of it is worth quoting and examining in detail. He clarifies by distinguishing three ways of referring to a man:

First I can speak of a man, signifying him by the name ‘man.’ Secondly I can think of the name ‘man,’ but not say it aloud. Thirdly my mind can visualize the man himself. It can do so either by means of a bodily image (imagining, say, his perceptible shape), or by means of reason (thinking, say, of his universal essence—in this case ‘rational mortal animal’). . . . In the third case I am not using . . . signs . . . I am expressing the thing itself inwardly within my mind, either by imagination (in the case of bodily things) or by understanding (in the case of rational things).

Each of these three kinds of utterance consists of its own kind of word. The words of the third and last kind (since they express things that are known) are natural and the same for all peoples. It is because these words exist that all other words have been invented. . . . We can also say without absurdity that natural words are truer, insofar as they resemble and designate their objects more manifestly. . . . no other words appear so similar to and is so representative of its object, as this likeness by means of which the thing itself is represented to the thinking mind’s eye. It is therefore the natural word that is correctly said to be the most proper and principal word for its object.

. . . Given this, it would seem possible that such a verbalization [i.e. by natural words] exists in the supreme substance, and that it existed before its objects, in order for things to be created through it, and which exists now, in order that through it things created may be known. 96

The inner utterance by which God understood the creatures He would make before He made them, then, is the truest sort of utterance: utterance by what he calls natural words. In the human mind, natural words are most basic, direct, and true way we have of thinking of a thing, thinking of the thing itself as we know it, and not just the series of sounds or letters by which we name it. “Similarly,” Anselm says, “the supreme substance first said within itself, as it were, everything that it was going to create, and then brought it about in accordance with, and through, that inner verbalization.” 97

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96 Ibid., 10.
97 Ibid., 11.
verbalizations: whereas a human craftsman has to draw on things he has seen before to construct his inner verbalization of what he will make, the Creator draws on no external source whatsoever. Unlike the inner verbalization of the human craftsman, that of the supreme substance “is neither taken from or given by anything external, and is the sole, sufficient and prime cause of its artificer’s complete work of production.”98 Now we can begin to see how Anselm arrives at the Second Person of the Trinity through this concept of inner verbalization. On the one hand, the supreme substance made everything that has been made through itself; on the other hand, the supreme substance has made everything that has been made through its inner verbalization. Therefore, Anselm reasons with his characteristic precision, the supreme substance’s Word, its inner verbalization, is the supreme substance.99 The Word, then, is the inner utterance through which God understands all things and through which God makes and sustains all things. The Word is not a creature, but nor is it another god. As the agent of creation, the Word is simply and truly God.

There is a further dissimilarity worth noting between the Word by which God represents all things to himself and the natural words through which we humans represent things to ourselves. In our case, while mental representations of things are the truest kind of word, they are less real, less true than things themselves. Our mental representations are imitations of the things they represent. Not so in the case of the Word. Anselm says it this way:

Truth, we usually say, is in the sitter while the likeness and image of that truth is in the portrait. What if we took it that likewise, the truth is in the Word, and the

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid., 12.
imitation in created things? The essence of the Word exists supremely, so that, in some sense, it is the only thing that exists. Created things, by comparison, do not exist. Nevertheless they are created through and according to the Word. The truth of what exists is in the Word, and imitation of the supreme essence in created things. Thus it is not the Word . . . that suffers increase or decrease in accordance with the degree of similarity to creation, but the other way round. Necessarily, for every creature, the degree of greatness of its existence and the degree of comparative excellence of its existence is the degree of its similarity to that which exists supremely and is supremely great.

The true reality of created things is found in the Word, in the supreme substance’s own inner verbalization of those things. It is not the Word which needs to correspond to created things, but created things which need to correspond to their representation in the Word. We might gloss Anselm’s claim here this way: God’s knowledge of rocks is not true just because it happens to correspond to actually existing rocks. It is rather that actual rocks exist insofar as they correspond to the form of rocks eternally known and uttered to the Father in his Word. The Word, Anselm says, is the truth of what is. This has especially important implications for rational creatures, who are free, in a way that rocks are not, to reject God’s intentions in creating them, and so turn away from reality. They are free, that is, to fail in a voluntary way to conform to the truth of their natures as known in the Word. To sin is thus for Anselm to fail to exist fully and truly, to be, just insofar as one sins, false. This is a way of expressing the metaphysical principle that evil is a privation, a lack, but with a richly Trinitarian inflection.

Significantly, it is at the point of this observation about truth and imitation that Anselm turns from the Word’s relation to creatures to a further reflection on the Word’s relationship to the supreme substance itself. So far, he has shown that the Word is the

100 Ibid., XXXI.

101 See also Anselm, De Veritate, 4-5, 8-9, which we will consider further on.
supreme substance, since through it all things are created. But, he asks, what exactly is the Word the word for? What does it express or represent? A word (in his sense of “natural” words, mental representations of things) depends on the thing for which it is the word. But the Word does not depend on the things it created, so it cannot be the word for those things which are made through it. Anselm’s reasons that, if nothing existed except the supreme substance, there would still be a natural word for the supreme substance. Indeed, through this word the supreme substance would understand itself. The Word, therefore, is the word for the supreme substance: in the Word God utters Himself. This self-utterance includes everything God eternally intends for creatures; Anselm says that “with one Word [the supreme substance] says both itself and what it has made.”\footnote{Anselm, \textit{Monologion}, 32-33, emphasis mine.} God’s utterance of Himself, of course, is a completely perfect representation of Himself, so perfect that the Word is consubstantial with the supreme nature. The relation between the supreme substance and its Word is thus one of eternal begetting, and hence the Word can be named the Son and the one whose Word the Son is can be named the Father.\footnote{Ibid., 39-42.} Anselm repeats this understanding of the nature of the Second Person of the Trinity (albeit much more briefly) in his subsequent treatise, the \textit{Proslogion}. There, he identifies the divine nature in the same classical terms as the earlier treatise:

\begin{quote}
And You are the being who exists in a strict and absolute sense because You have neither past nor future existence but only present existence . . . And You are life and light and wisdom and blessedness and eternity and many suchlike good things, and yet You are nothing save the one supreme good, You are completely sufficient unto Yourself, needing nothing, but rather He whom all things need in order that they may have being and well-being.
\end{quote}
. . . You are this good, O God the Father; this is Your Word, that is to say, Your Son. For there cannot be any other than what You are, or any thing greater or lesser than You, in the Word by which You utter Yourself. For Your Word is as true as You are truthful and is therefore the very truth that You are and that is not other than You. And You are so simple that there cannot be born of You any other than what You are.\textsuperscript{104}

We do well to keep in mind Anselm’s detailed reflection on the nature of the Word and the relation of the Word to both the Father and to creatures as we interpret CDH. We will need to try to read the story Anselm tells there about the atonement, including any metaphors or analogies with creaturely realities it contains, in a way that fits with his detailed theology of the Word. I will argue that we can do so quite naturally: Christ’s atoning act will turn out to be nothing other than the perfect and satisfying utterance of God’s eternal intentions within an individual human nature, an utterance spoken into the history of a fallen humanity.

\textit{Justice and Truth in Rational Creatures}

With Anselm’s understanding of justice and mercy in God in view, as well as his understanding of the Word, we need one more piece of background: his account of the way justice and truth exist in rational creatures. In the \textit{Monologion}, Anselm turns to the topic of the rational mind after the lengthy discussions about the supreme essence, including its Trinitarian nature. It is at this point that he asks how it has been possible for him to say anything about the being he has been talking about, given that it is unlike everything else that exists. He grants that “one cannot get to see anything about the supreme nature by means of what is proper to it. Rather, one must work through

\textsuperscript{104} Anselm, \textit{Proslogion}, 22-23.
something other than it.” One approaches most closely to knowing the supreme nature through what is most similar to it, namely the rational mind.

In Augustinian fashion, Anselm thinks of the mind as an image of the Trinity in its ability to be conscious, to understand itself, and to love itself. But the mind most fully reflects the image of the supreme nature not in its relation to itself, but rather in its relation to the supreme nature: its ability to be conscious of, to understand, and to love the supreme nature. The created mind is most like God in its ability to know and love God:

. . . the mind is demonstrably an image of the supreme essence, in so far as it can be conscious of, understand, and love it. And the authenticity of the image discerned in the mind is in direct proportion to the greatness and the similarity of its mind to the supreme essence.

The ability to be conscious of, to understand, and to love that which, of all things, is greatest and best—no other gift bestowed on rational creation is conceivably as excellent or as similar to the supreme wisdom. No other created trait so betrays the image of its Creator.

Recall that for Anselm the Word is the supreme nature’s understanding of itself, such a perfect understanding that indeed it is consubstantial with that of which it is the understanding. At the same time, the Word is also the supreme nature’s representation to itself of the things it will make. Creatures, therefore, are themselves reflections of the supreme nature who created them. Rational creatures, in particular, reflect the supreme nature by their capacity to understand the supreme nature, by being in this way like the

105 Anselm, Monologion, 66.

106 Though we passed over the Monologion’s pneumatology, it bears mentioning that Anselm thinks of the Third Person there as the love which proceeds from the supreme nature to its self-understanding, and from its self-understanding to itself. This Love, he argues, is as great as and of a single essence with the First and Second Persons; unlike the Word, however, it is not born, but rather breathed from each of the other two, and so is properly called Holy Spirit.

107 Anselm, Monologion, 67.
Word. For Anselm, this implies both that the mind’s attempt to understand itself points to God and that its attempt to understand God is the truest intimation of what it is itself. The more fully that the mind understands and loves the Creator—the more, that is to say, that the mind is like the Word—the more authentic an image the mind is of its Creator, and the more it is what it is created to be. Since this capacity to know and love God is the highest capacity of human nature, that which, above all, which we were created to exercise, Anselm reasons that it also marks out our most fundamental debt to our Creator. It is the best thing that we can do, and so it is most of all what we ought to want to do.

Given that for Anselm God is identical with goodness itself, justice itself, and whatever it is unqualifiedly better to be than not, this debt is perhaps not best understand as a narrow injunction to study (and enjoy) theology. It would seem to include all of our efforts to know and to love what is good because it is good, what is just because it is just, what is true because it is true, what is beautiful because it is beautiful, and so forth. Properly understood, each of these are actually identical with the fundamental duty to strive to know and love God for God’s sake. To be sure, there is no doubt that the sort of knowledge of the divine nature Anselm himself pursues in his treatises and the response of love expressed in his prayers (sometimes, of course, prayer and treatise come together for Anselm) is an important part of what he has in mind. Even so, most especially through his identification of God as goodness itself, justice itself, truth itself, and so on, he goes some way towards tying the most basic exercise of rationality (which is always for Anselm a moral matter) into this fundamental duty of human nature. For it is this

108 Ibid., 68.
connection that most clearly and comprehensively ties all human obligations together in
the fundamental obligation (which Anselm already in the *Monologion* calls a debt) to
understand and love God.

Anselm developed the connection between truth and justice in God and creatures
in more detail in his later treatise on truth, *De Veritate*. There, Anselm considers how the
unity of truth is to be understood—if God is Truth, how exactly are other things said to be
ture? He approaches an answer by considering various kinds of things that can be true,
and then arriving a definition of truth. Sentences are true in two ways: by correctly
signifying what they are meant to signify, and by signifying that what is is (or that what is
not is not). Opinions or thoughts are true when a person thinks as she ought, which is to
say, when she thinks that what is, is. Likewise, for Anselm, the rational will can be called
tue when a person wills what he ought. Actions, too, can be true or false; Anselm argues
that to do a thing is implicitly to affirm that one ought to do it. Indeed, Anselm sees this
kind of signification as even more forceful than making an explicit assertion. In this way,
for Anselm, actions speak louder than words. The actions of rational creatures can thus be
false, by signifying that they ought to do what, in truth, they ought not to do. While the
possibility of false actions is only open to creatures with a rational will, “natural” actions
can also be called true insofar as these actions express the truth of the natures of things
known in the divine wisdom, and the truth that they ought to be what they are and act as
they naturally act: “If fire receives the ability to heat from the one that makes it exist,
then when it heats, it does what it ought. So I do not see where the unfittingness would be
in saying that fire exhibits truth and rectitude when it does what it ought.”

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109 Anselm, *De Veritate*, 5. In this quote, it is the student who speaks, but the teacher agrees.
Through this line of reasoning, especially by the repeated connection between truth and ought-ness, Anselm arrives at the idea of truth as rectitude—specifically, rectitude perceptible by the mind. Anselm offers here a systematic connection of God’s status as Creator and Sustainer of all things with His status as Truth itself. For God to be Truth seems to mean, for Anselm, that all other truths have their truth from God. The notion of rectitude, of being or doing what one ought, provides an explanation for how this is. Anything that exists has its being, its existence and its characteristic modes of action, from God; as a good and wise Creator, God gives to things the natures they ought to have, natures that correspond with God’s knowledge of them in the Word. The truth and reality of everything that exists, then, derives from this alignment with God’s knowledge and God’s will, from being what they ought to be and doing what they ought to do, or else what they are permitted to do according to the divine wisdom and goodness. In this way, we can see that the truth of all these different kinds of things (sentences, opinions, wills, the senses, natural actions, non-natural actions, and essences) is ultimately one, rooted in mind and will of God.

For our purposes we need to pay special attention to truth in the wills and actions of rational creatures. As we have seen, for Anselm, to will or act truly is to will or act as one ought, which is just to say it is for one’s will and one’s action to conform to the divine will. This is the point at which Anselm draws a connection between truth and justice: justice is nothing other than rectitude of will. To will truly is to possess rectitude of will, which is to be just.\textsuperscript{110} More precisely, a just will is one which preserves rectitude for its own sake. Merely willing what is right is not enough unless it is willed because it

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 4, 5, 9, 12.
is right. In this way, we can begin to see how it is that God is true and just through Himself, while other things are true and just through Him, by conformity with His will and His wisdom; human obligations of all sorts are ultimately, in this theological scheme, specific instances of the general obligation to God.

A rational will, we have already observed, is unique in that it can fail to stand in the truth. It can fail to be just. Given that all things are what they are through the divine wisdom, one might wonder how this can be. Anselm makes clear that this possibility is a result of divine permission rather than divine intent. It ought to be (and is) the case that angels and human beings possess the rational natures in virtue of which it is possible for them to will, even though in virtue of that nature they may (and often do) will what they ought not will. It is worth noticing that Anselm takes great pains to define free will in terms of its positive object rather than as the ability to sin; the ability to sin, he argues, is more precisely understood as lack of complete freedom, a weakness, rather than a power or capacity. Free will, he argues, is the capacity to maintain rectitude provided one currently possesses it. This formulation aims freedom at its proper end, namely loving God for God’s sake.

Anselm also devotes some reflection the structure of the will in order to explain how it is possible for a rational creature to fall short of rectitude, and how it can be that creatures in beatitude can no longer lose rectitude. The essential structure of creaturely wills is such that they can will two things: justice, and happiness. To will justice is to will what God wills; to will happiness is to will what is pleasing or beneficial to oneself. One

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111 See Anselm, *De Libertate Arbitrii*, especially chapters 1 and 13. See also *CDH* II.10, where Anselm addresses the argument that if it is impossible for Christ to sin then he cannot do what he does freely, and is therefore not praiseworthy for his righteousness.

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of these must be given priority. To fall short of rectitude involves giving priority to happiness, willing justice only insofar as it accords with one’s own happiness. To be just, or to maintain rectitude, is to will happiness insofar as it accords with justice, which is to say, with God’s will.\(^\text{112}\) The ultimate result of a just will is the (just) reception of happiness from God; having received happiness in this fashion, there is now no more possibility of unjust desire, for the only possible source of temptation, as it were, is removed. As Anselm puts it in the *Monologion*, the supreme substance “requites its lover with itself,” and the nature of the happiness produced is such that the one who receives it will never will to lose it.\(^\text{113}\) The soul finds rest in God alone, but in God, it truly does find rest. For Anselm, God’s gracious gift of Himself is the end for which rational creatures were made; in keeping with our capacity of will, God intends this end as a reward for just will, which is to say a will that obeys God and assents to God’s own timetable for granting the reward of ultimate happiness. This is the only kind of will that loves God for God’s sake, rather than for the sake of its own happiness. Since God is goodness itself, this is in fact the only way that God is fit to be loved. Only this kind of love embodies a full and proper gratitude for the gift of existence, directing the rational nature to the one who is its source and their proper end, rather than at some lower end. Only this kind of love signifies the truth of human (or angelic) nature as known in the Word. So, therefore, the love which loves God for God’s own sake is the only kind of love which fittingly receives God as its reward, for it is the only love which truly desires God, rather than idolatrously desiring some lower good.

\(^{112}\) Anselm, *De Casu Diaboli*, 13-15.

\(^{113}\) Anselm, *Monologion*, 70.
This vision of human nature is worth keeping in mind as we interpret *CDH*. It provides the metaphysical background that illuminates Anselm’s reflection on the atonement. As we shall see below, the vision of God and rational creatures at play here helps to make clear why for Anselm ‘mere’ forgiveness would be a form of untruth; why God’s justice to Himself calls forth mercy towards creatures in the specific form of the Incarnation and Cross of Christ; why God’s honor is not a matter of whether God feels insulted or adequately respected, but instead specifies the fundamental relationship between Creator and rational creature; and, finally, how Anselm understands the human will of Christ to conform perfectly to the will of the Father, rather than representing a separate will intent on changing the Father’s attitude or feelings towards humanity.

**A Better Reading of *Cur Deus Homo***

*Anselm’s Explicit Relationship to the Fathers in CDH*

With this background in view, we can turn to *CDH*. We first consider Anselm’s understanding of his own work in relation to the patristic tradition as he understood it. In particular, he articulates his project primarily as one of addition rather than rejection:

> For even the Fathers, because “the days of [human beings] are short,” were not able to say all that they could have said if they had lived longer; and the logic of the truth is so copious and profound that it cannot be exhausted by mortals. Moreover, the Lord, whose promise is to be with the Church “until the end of the world,” does not cease to bestow his gifts within it.\(^{114}\)

If we give Anselm the benefit of the doubt here, then we must presume he was not offering one theory that could only be set over and against others found in the Fathers. Instead, he seems to think he is adding a certain kind of reason to what is already there in...

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\(^{114}\) Anselm, *CDH*, Commendation.
the tradition (even as he is rejecting other possible reasons). Indeed, he is trying to show that the truth that the tradition has conveyed about the work of Christ can be understood as fitting and necessary according to reason. This is not to say that Anselm’s agrees with everything all of the Fathers wrote at every point—Anselm clearly differs, for example, with Gregory of Nyssa and others over whether the devil has any legitimate right of ownership over humanity. But it is to say that he does not present himself as having set out a theory that is opposed to the tradition that preceded him. Instead, his intention is to add a certain kind of logical and explanatory support to what has already been unfolded. Of course, Anselm may have failed in this intention, or been insincere in expressing it; we cannot simply rule out those interpretive options based on what he claims to be doing. Nonetheless, if we can reasonably interpret him as being consistent with the aim he expresses here, then we probably ought to do so.

The question, then, is how it can be that Anselm sees himself as mainly engaged in addition and support when he clearly also contradicts certain elements of what came before. More precisely, what is it that he sees himself as supporting, since he clearly is not supporting literally everything that the Fathers said? Before attempting to answer this question, we will need to consider carefully the relationship between Anselm’s soteriological vision and those that had come before. This is especially true given the long history of interpreters like those mentioned above, who have emphasized what Anselm’s innovations relative to the patristic tradition to such a degree that we see the differences much more easily than we see the connections.

Ultimately, however, we will see that Anselm took a rather thick set of propositions from scripture and tradition about what Christ accomplished more or less as
givens to be explained (or, more precisely, to be demonstrated as necessary from reason), including certainly the elemental claims that he saved by defeated the devil, that he provided saving teachings and a perfect and saving example of human faithfulness, that he gave himself as a perfect offering to the Father, and so forth. It is difficult to untangle and list every relevant proposition to which Anselm might have taken himself to be committed, but even this much will be enough to show the deeply traditional shape of Anselm’s doctrine of atonement, especially when read in light of his fundamentally classical Trinitarianism. We will see that, in fact, he does not fit into the atonement theory paradigm: rather than either selecting one from among these ideas or holding them in a loose configuration, Anselm attempts to understand them all together in a systematic fashion. But first, we need to unpack some of Anselm’s core concepts, such as satisfaction, debt, and honor. From there, we can observe the way that these concepts connect to other those which are usually thought of as belonging to other, alternative atonement theories.

Satisfaction, Honor, and Debt

For Anselm, satisfaction is one of two ways in which sin can be justly addressed, since it involves willingly repairing the damage that was caused by the wrongdoing. Satisfaction involves first of all restoring whatever was taken away by the wrongdoing, or providing something equally valuable to the injured party. But, Anselm says, it is not enough merely to restore the equivalent of what was taken away; satisfaction requires something more, “in proportion to the insult . . . inflicted.” If someone steals an item, satisfaction requires not just returning the item, but also making additional restitution to

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the victim’s honor for the dishonor done by the act of theft. In the case where the wrongdoer cannot or will not make satisfaction, punishment is required. To some, this all makes it look as if concepts drawn from law and economic exchange, and social arrangements of a distinctly medieval sort are governing Anselm’s understanding of sin and its repair.

If we look beneath the surface, however, we can see that theological commitments are controlling Anselm’s use of legal and moral concepts rather than the other way around. Anselm offers at least two arguments for why God ought not to forgive sin without satisfaction (where for Anselm to forgive is simply to refrain from punishment even without satisfaction). The first and more fundamental argument is that it would be unfitting for God to leave sin unregulated, to treat sin the same as righteousness. Indeed, Anselm argues, if God allows the sinner to be in exactly the same position as the righteous person without any recompense, then the sinner appears to have greater freedom than the righteous person; the will and actions of the righteous will have been subject to law (the law which the righteous person obeys) whereas the will and actions of the sinner will have been subject to no law.

Anselm discerns something fundamentally irrational and ugly about this. Recall that, for Anselm, to carry out an action is as if to signify that the action ought to be done; for a ruler to treat sin the same as righteousness thus seems to signify that they are in fact the same when in fact they are not. A judge or ruler who acts as if they are the same is irrational and corrupt; in an Anselm’s terms, such a judge would be acting falsely and unjustly. This is all manifestly contradictory to the nature of God, who is Truth and

\[116\] Ibid., I.12.
Justice, and therefore cannot simply be indifferent to falsehood and injustice.\textsuperscript{117} Sin, if it were unregulated by God (if it were ‘merely’ forgiven), would create a rupture in the moral fabric of the universe, a contradiction given God’s nature. Satisfaction is the voluntary repair of that rupture, over against punishment, which is its involuntary repair. It is the only way, for Anselm, in which reconciliation is ultimately compatible with truth and reason. With satisfaction, whatever was damaged is voluntarily restored, and the act of doing the damage becomes, in a sense, the occasion for an equivalent supererogatory good beyond what would have been required before. In a genuinely satisfying act, the moral order of things is thus restored.

What is the specific character of the rupture created by sin and of the healing that satisfaction provides? The initial and most fundamental locus of this rupture is between the will of the sinner and the divine will—which is also to say with Justice itself. It is most fundamentally the will which is either just or unjust, and actions follow, and from there follow consequences of unjust actions, often some form of material harm.\textsuperscript{118} In order to properly satisfy, things must be set right at all three levels. Recall that for Anselm what rational creatures owe to God is to love God for God’s sake, or, put differently, to align their will with God’s in all things—this is what it is to honor God properly. As we have observed above, for Anselm, this debt is given by the nature of human persons as creatures and by God’s ontological status as Creator and as the


\textsuperscript{118} See, Anselm, \textit{De Veritate}, 12.
supreme essence.\textsuperscript{119} God, as the supreme essence, is the highest end of the human capacities of knowing and willing—indeed, these capacities exist most fundamentally for the sake of knowing and loving the highest good, namely God. Sin is above all a break in that alignment of will, a misuse of the highest capacity of human nature, in which it is directed not at God but at a lower end, at the happiness of the creature in way that goes beyond justice. Repairing this rupture requires realigning the will, so that it now conforms to justice, which is to say, to the divine will. Given a just will, though, the rational creature must necessarily will the reverse of what it previously willed in sinning. It must will to set right whatever harmful consequences followed from the wrong actions it willed before, and, moreover, to restore proper honor to the one who was wronged, which, given the initial wrongdoing, means going beyond what would have been required before the wrongdoing.

This way of understanding the relationship between sin and satisfaction is analogous to the way satisfaction provides for reconciliation between human persons, but it does not thereby reduce God to an insulted or vengeful human being. In the case of human beings, according to this way of thinking, wrongdoing starts with an unjust a will—a will, specifically, out of alignment with the (just) will of the person wronged. The victim wills to use his justly acquired money for some good purpose, while the thief wills simply to take it for himself. The thief then takes the money (an unjust act), with the result that the victim can no longer use the money for the good purpose he intended (a harmful consequence). If the thief sees the error of his ways and reforms his will, he now wills the opposite of what he willed before: he wants the victim to have the money that

\textsuperscript{119} Anselm, \textit{Monologion}, Chapter 67-8.
was rightfully his money. Indeed, the thief wants never to have stolen at all, and recognizes that the dignity of his victim warrants something beyond simply returning to the previous state of affairs. He therefore returns the amount he stole and also honors the victim in some further way, perhaps by paying more than he initially stole, to make up for the dishonor he did to the victim’s intrinsic dignity by stealing from him. Likewise, a ruler or judge has to provide for justice by requiring satisfaction for victims of injustice as a matter of law; while the judge cannot control the wills of the involved parties (the first level of the breach), she can at least make satisfaction at the levels of action and consequence a requirement of restoring the wrongdoer to society (and likewise restrain the victim from vengeance). In this way she can at least provide for the possibility of genuinely just reconciliation—this is only possible if she requires something of the unjust that is not required of the just. If nothing else, the requirement to make satisfaction may guide the thief’s will back towards justice, since it instructs the thief accurately in what justice entails, in what he ought to will and ought to have willed all along in virtue of the dignity of the one he stole from.

But we should also notice where God is not analogous to the wronged human person or the human ruler. While our intrinsic debts to one another as human beings are only partial, we owe God everything we have and are. And while the wronged person has an intrinsic dignity that ought to be respected by other rational beings, she has this dignity in virtue of being created by God, whereas God’s intrinsic dignity is rooted in nothing but His own essence. In this way, our debts to each other are grounded ontologically in our more fundamental debt to God. Properly honoring God’s creatures is part of what it is to properly honor God. In addition, whereas human judges have to be limited to considering
mostly outward actions rather than minds and wills, God perfectly knows and judges based on the inner will of a person. And, while wronged creatures can respond in ways governed by sinful passions, desiring vengeance or apology out of a feeling of being insulted or taken advantage of, God’s justice is in no way rooted in such passions or in any injury creatures can do to Him—God’s requirement of satisfaction follows from the supreme goodness and justice of his will, which is to say, His divine nature. Indeed, it flows from His supremely good intentions for creatures, and His unwillingness to declare righteous something less than the fulfillment of those intentions.

At this juncture we can now appreciate Anselm’s second argument that God cannot merely forgive without satisfaction. As we noted above, if a sinner were all of a sudden to possess a righteous will, then she would desire that satisfaction be made. That is, she would will that the damage she caused be repaired—the opposite of what she willed in sinning.\footnote{Anselm, \textit{CDH}, I.24.} If satisfaction has not been made, this desire would be unfulfilled, constituting a lack. Such a lack conflicts with the notion of beatitude, a state in which the Blessed lack no good they desire. In addition, Anselm argues, it is unfitting that souls in beatitude should be lacking in anything they desire, since the just soul wills only what is just. That is, this is the kind of desire which it is genuinely better to have fulfilled than not. To will to make satisfaction is to will that God’s intentions be fulfilled, and surely if God is Goodness itself then it is better that such a desire be fulfilled than not; what God wills simply ought to be the case. Final blessedness cannot involve that kind of desire going unfulfilled. God’s requirement of satisfaction, then, is fundamentally relational and restorative concept: it is about restoring the sinner and the one sinned against to a state of
rightly relating to one another, and bringing sinners to the full dignity and happiness for which they were created. And it does all this in a way that is fitted to what rational creatures are, as it involves the will and action of sinners to participate in the process of restoring justice. Satisfaction allows them to be a part of repairing the damage they caused, which is what they will want to do if they are just. If they are not just, then it also teaches them what they ought to want, requiring them to enact the true weight of the wrong and the true dignity of the one they wronged.

We can now examine honor, another of Anselm’s central concepts, in a bit more detail. For Anselm, honor has to do with the ontological and moral state of right relations. In *CDH*, Anselm considers God’s honor from two angles: with respect to God, and with respect to rational creatures. In the first sense, God’s honor is intrinsic and cannot be affected by what creatures do; God is the supreme essence, the proper end of our capacities for knowing and willing, regardless of whether or not we treat Him as such. In the second sense, a rational creature can fail to conform to or reflect the truth about God’s intrinsic ontological status relative to them in the way appropriate for rational creatures—that is, by willing what is just. So, honor here is not a subjective feeling of superiority or of being sufficiently respected. The way in which a creature can be said to “take away” from God’s honor is not by making God feel insulted or damaging Him in any way. Instead, as Nicolas Cohen helpfully puts it, “In Anselm’s view, all beings have an honor that reflects their essence. This honor is fundamental to the nature of a being . . .”121 Moreover, “Honor also reflects the relationships between things. In any given

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relationship, one party honors (or dishonors) the other based on the degree to which their actions are appropriate with respect to the other party’s being.” For Anselm, satisfaction is about the restoration of rational beings to a state in which their wills are once again united in truth and justice, insofar as it restores conformity between the will and actions of the wrongdoer and the honor or intrinsic dignity of the one wronged. This state of right relations is the only way for the sinner to be restored to happiness in the fullest sense, namely beatitude.

Satisfaction is thus the way that a community maintains its moral integrity and beauty in the case that its members commit injustice. In the case of the wrong-doer, satisfaction involves a movement of will and action back into proper relationship to the honor of the one wronged. In the case of the one who was wronged, it enables a genuinely dignified reconciliation, where ‘mere’ forgiveness would do a kind of violence to the intrinsic dignity of the victim. The moral integrity of a community is not upheld when wronged parties simply consent to be wronged, for in so doing, they fail to act truly and justly towards their own intrinsic honor. This point underscores the meaning of saying that satisfaction reunites the wills of the two parties in truth and justice: they should be united in properly honoring the dignity of the one who as wronged, rather than united in accepting something less than proper honor. The importance of unity of wills also reveals the reason why Christ’s satisfaction could not apply to just anyone, regardless of his or her inner disposition towards God and other people. The application of Christ’s reward specifically to the faithful is not arbitrary. As Thomas Aquinas would later put it, one person can make satisfaction for another only given unity of wills in

122 Ibid., 42.
charity; not coincidentally, this is for Thomas what the mystical unity between Christ and
his Church is. Thomas’s rationale gives support to the fittingness Anselm discerns in
the fact that Christ’s reward is supplied precisely to those who imitate him, who love
what he loves. Contemporary critics of Anselm often fail to see the relational focus of Anselm’s
concept of satisfaction. They tend to reduce satisfaction to an impersonal transaction, an
thus infer that it has no organic connection to the individual believer’s relationship to
God or growth into holiness. In fact, satisfaction has deep relational significance. It
begins with the assumption that all rational creatures stand in a web of relations of loyalty
and love to other creatures, and ultimately to God in virtue of their natures and their
concrete histories. Notice, for instance, that Anselm’s conception of Christ as satisfier on
our behalf envisions Jesus’s supremely loving act on our behalf as generating a personal
and familial bond of loyalty and friendship to Jesus himself, embodied in subsequent
repentance and worship. It envisions gratitude to Christ for doing for us what we could
not, for setting things right, as well as learning from Christ’s example and his teachings
about how to respond properly. It likewise envisions the believer receiving grace

123 See ST Suppl. 13, ii, ad 1. Much of what Thomas says about satisfaction falls under discussion of the
sacrament of penance, which Thomas himself did not complete; instead, it appears in the Supplement
 penned by Fr. Rainoldo de Piperno drawing on Aquinas’ Scriptum on the Sentences of Peter Lombard. So,
it has to be said that we cannot be certain that what we find in the Supplement reflects Aquinas’ mature
views. Nonetheless, the idea at play here seems to me basically compatible with what appears viz.
satisfaction in the questions on the Passion in ST III, and moreover, it is conceptually helpful here in
clarifying an apparent problem in Anselm, whether or not it reflects Thomas’ mature views.

124 Anselm, CDH, II.19.

125 Ibid., I.5. There, Anselm argues that it would be inappropriate for our salvation to come through
someone who was not also God, since then our gratitude and loyalty would be due to that person and not
directly to God.
mediated through the sacraments Jesus instituted, and through this process joining herself to Christ’s perfectly satisfying offering of himself to God.\textsuperscript{126}

*Other ‘Theories’ of Atonement in CDH*

*i. Recapitulation and the Restoration of the Divine Image*

We are now in a position to notice how language and concepts normally associated with other theories of atonement not only appear in Anselm’s treatise, but play a crucial role in giving specific content to Anselm’s more formal concepts of debt, satisfaction, and honor we have just examined. We can see how this works by considering the concrete debt produced by human sin. The debt created by an act of wrongdoing will be, first of all, whatever is taken away by that act. In the case of human sin, Anselm says that what is taken away from God is, “whatever he planned to do with regard to the human species.”\textsuperscript{127} As we have seen, what God most fundamentally intends for human beings is that their minds and wills will relate appropriately to God, or in other words that they would know and love him for his own sake. Unpacking our debt of honor to God in these terms opens up a deep connection between satisfaction and what is normally identified as the distinct recapitulation theory, most famously associated with Irenaeus. Irenaeus’s account is fundamentally consonant with Anselm’s:

\[\ldots\text{when [the Son] was enfleshed and became a human being, he summed up in himself the long history of the human race and so furnished us with salvation in a short and summary way, to the end that what we had lost in}\]

\textsuperscript{126} See, for instance, Williams, “The Sacramental Presuppositions of Anselm’s ‘Cur Deus Homo.’” Williams gives detailed attention to the Eucharistic background to *CDH*. Though he perhaps overstates the supposed shift from patristic emphasis on baptism to medieval emphasis on Eucharist and penance, he elaborates quite helpfully on the textual and conceptual connections between Anselm’s spiritual writings and *CDH*.

\textsuperscript{127} Anselm, *CDH.*, I.23.
Adam (namely, to be after the image and likeness of God) we might recover in Christ Jesus.

It was impossible that the very humanity which had once been conquered and shattered by its disobedience should reconstitute itself and obtain the prize which belongs to victory.\textsuperscript{128}

Thus,

We had to receive, through the Son’s agency, participation in him. The Word, having been made flesh, had to share himself with us. That is why he went through every stage of human life, restoring all of them to communion with God.\textsuperscript{129}

Like Irenaeus, Anselm holds that beatitude is a “prize which belongs to victory,” which is to say, a genuinely human victory. Moreover, Anselm shows that what the victory which is owed to God by humanity includes a human life lived fully in line with God’s original intentions. On Anselm’s view, humanity cannot be saved except if those intentions are fulfilled. Recapitulation is therefore bound up with Anselm’s vision of what is required of humanity and thus what Jesus Christ accomplishes. This connection shows that the faithful life of Jesus (and not just his death) is part of Anselm’s vision of satisfaction: the faithful human life is what was owed by nature, and voluntary faithfulness unto death of a sinless person is supererogatory because it goes beyond what was initially owed. The latter could not be supererogatory without the former. Conversely, Christ’s supererogatory self-offering makes it possible for the faithfulness of those who are united to him to be received by God as acceptable and pleasing; in virtue of this, God may then justly reward them with beatitude. Christ’s payment of humanity’s debt thus makes it possible for many other human persons to be restored to their intended


\textsuperscript{129} Irenaeus of Lyons, \textit{Against Heresies}, III.18.7, translated in Ibid., 54.
state, which is to say knowledge and love of God, in justice and without any lack or unfulfilled desire.

Anselm’s account of atonement, therefore, does not involve a rejection of an alternative Irenaeus “recapitulation” theory of atonement. Instead, Anselm underscores recapitulation as a matter of necessity, and as a display of God’s justice and mercy, rooted in the fulfillment of God’s immutable and profoundly good intentions for humanity. Even though it is true that Anselm has relatively little to say explicitly about the events of Christ’s life within the text of *CDH*, he nonetheless formally establishes human faithfulness (both of Christ, and of those for whom he atones) as a fitting and necessary element of the atonement.130

Especially in the context of Anselm’s theology of the Word, we can see a deep harmony between satisfaction and recapitulation. Since the Word is both God’s utterance of himself and his utterance of creatures, it is profoundly fitting that the Word would be the one who would become incarnate, and that He would be the perfect expression of God’s intentions in creating human persons, God’s perfectly satisfying self-utterance in a particular human life. While Christ is infinitely greater than any other human being in virtue of his divinity, he nonetheless exemplifies and fulfills nothing but God’s original intentions, summed up perfectly in a single life, spoken into the history of a humanity that had rejected those intentions. The context of this sinful history gives a certain shape to the utterance, necessarily imposing the tragic element of death, which perhaps would

130 Though, to note a point that will be explored further on, Anselm does in fact touch on the life of Jesus in *CDH*, even though for methodological reasons he often does so without explicit reference or citation. On this, see for example, Katherine Sonderegger, “Anselm, Defensor Fidei,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 3 (July 2007): 352–53.
not be there in the context of a perfectly faithful humanity. Even so, as God’s perfect self-utterance, Christ takes on death in such a way that by it he achieves our restoration and reconciliation to God.

Nicolas Cohen has also drawn a parallel between the role God’s honor plays in Anselm and the role of God’s image in the soteriology of Athanasius. He points out several relevant features of Anselm’s use of honor, namely that (1) it is tied to God’s essence, (2) it is also inherently tied to the relationship between Creator and creature, and (3) it is eternally maintained via punishment or recompense. Cohen points out that each of these features is true of Athanasius’ use of the concept of God’s image in his own treatise on the incarnation, De Incarnatione Verbi, and, Athanasius puts them to the same use as Anselm, namely to demonstrate the necessity of the Incarnation for salvation.

God’s image is tied to God’s essence, but it is also tied to the connection between Creator and creature. The marring of the image is what calls for punishment. As for Anselm and God’s honor, it can only be restored by the Incarnation—by the Word, the agent of creation, coming into humanity to restore and fulfill God’s intentions in creating. This is a striking and illuminating parallel, for the proper honor of God is, for Anselm, precisely how a rational creature bears the divine image. It is the participation of the human mind and will in God. Likewise, for Athanasius, to bear God’s image involves the same things as proper honor of God involves for Anselm, namely remaining in contemplation and love of God. Once the image is marred, the reflection of the human mind and will of

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132 See, again, Anselm, Monologion, 66-8, where he explains how the rational mind, in its capacities for knowledge and love of God, “is itself the mirror and image of the Supreme Essence.”
its Creator is broken. While God’s intrinsic honor remains intact, its reflection in the
sinner is broken. For both Anselm and Athanasius, this is the affront which calls for
punishment, and this punishment can only be averted or undone by a human person in
whom the image/honor of God is not marred, but who, nonetheless, is a part of the human
family descending from Adam and Eve. This can only be accomplished by the
Incarnation of the Word, who is the true Image. Cohen spells out the “shared approach to
the rationale for the Incarnation” between Anselm and Athanasius this way:

For both [Anselm and Athanasius], the order of creation flows from the
nature of God as Creator. Humans occupy a privileged place within that
order in that they are given the gift of rationality. This rationality comes
with the attendant responsibility to actively maintain a life of obedience to
God. When this order of creation was violated by sin, it was God’s nature
as perfect Creator and lover of creation that was the driving force behind
the Incarnation as a means of restoring the order of the universe as it was
originally created. Only God as creator could accomplish this act of
restoration because it involved a re-creation on the magnitude of the
original creation and only God is capable of this.\(^\text{133}\)

At this level, there certainly is a deep compatibility between Anselm’s account
and the patristic tradition represented by Irenaeus and Athanasius. Like them, Anselm’s
account presents the God-man as the one in whom God’s most fundamental intentions for
human nature are fulfilled, and through whom those intentions can be restored in others.
Anselm attempts to show that those intentions had to be met perfectly within a human
being for human beings to reach beatitude, and that, given the Fall, they could not be met
in any other way than by the Incarnation, in which God Himself in takes a human nature
and recapitulates, embodies, exemplifies, and fulfills those intentions. Only God can
restore the image of God, but it is humanity which needs the image restored. Only God

\(^{133}\) Cohen, “Patristic Analogues in Anselm of Canterbury’s ‘Cur Deus Homo,’” 64.
can perform an act of such magnitude that it can outweigh the damage wrought by sin, and yet a member of the human family needs to perform it, so as to fulfill God’s good intentions in creating human beings. This is the story that Anselm tells in terms of debt, honor, and satisfaction, and it is fundamentally compatible with patristic language of recapitulating and restoring the divine image in human nature. Indeed, if Anselm’s arguments hold, then the recapitulation and restoration of the image of God by the Word of God is necessary for the satisfaction of our debt, or in other words, for the fulfillment of God’s intentions for us.

ii. Christus Victor

Moving beyond the fundamental level of the mind and will, Anselm has more to say about what is “taken away” from God by sin, and how it is that Christ restores it. As we have seen, what human beings owe to God first is to love God above all things for God’s sake. What follows from this is that human beings should do whatever it is God calls them to do. So, secondly, what is taken away includes whatever concrete acts God had in mind for humans to do which they failed to do and, thirdly, whatever larger purpose God had in mind to which those acts were meant to contribute. We can consider the second level and third level in turn.

At the level of concrete actions which humanity failed to carry out, Anselm identifies a particular intention for human beings in the biblical narrative of Adam and Eve. He suggests that God intended for humanity to overcome the devil:

A. In the Garden, man was created without sin, as if he were placed there as God’s deputy, in a position between God and the devil, the intention being that he might overcome the devil by not consenting when the devil recommended sin by means of persuasion. . . . And although man was
easily capable of doing this, he allowed himself to be conquered by persuasion alone, not under forcible compulsion.\footnote{134}{Anselm, \textit{CDH}, I.22.}

Given the fall of the devil, that is, God placed human beings in a position to vindicate God’s righteousness by their free obedience in resistance to temptation.\footnote{135}{Because this intention depends on a contingent free act of sin by a creature (the devil), it seems that it must be subordinate, lower in priority within the divine will, both to God’s intentions for human nature viz. the mind and will, and to God’s cosmic intentions about the constitution of the perfect community in beatitude. That is, the God cannot have intended the devil to fall, but given foreknowledge of his fall, God permitted him to tempt Adam and Eve and willed them to resist. For Anselm, in response to the fall of the angels, God increases the number of humans who are to participate in the heavenly community so as to fill up the number vacated by fallen angels, and so it seems reasonable to speculate that it is likewise in response to the angels’ fall that God gives humanity the specific vocation to vindicate His honor over against the devil by resisting him.} What humanity owed to God, therefore, was just such a victory over the devil. Because God intended that we do it, we simply ought to have done it. The failure of Adam and Eve to carry out God’s intent incurs a further debt. Now it is necessary not just to be victorious over the devil, but to do so in a way that goes beyond resisting mere verbal temptation. We ought to will to do what we were initially supposed to do, but also to go beyond it in order to make up for the fact of our failure. This, however, is something we cannot do in our sinful state. After the fall of Adam and Eve, Anselm argues, only a person who is both human and divine (one who inherits the debt of nature but not the stain of sin) can manage this defeat of the devil. The debt of a human victory of the devil seems to function on a familial or social level; it is not that every individual human being must overcome the devil, but rather that someone representing humanity must do so.\footnote{136}{For this distinction between a ‘social’ and individual debt in \textit{CDH}, see Campbell, “The Conceptual Roots of Anselm’s Soteriology,” 262–63.} It is in this sense that Christ, being a part of our human family, can share our debt and is in an...
appropriate position to fulfill it. He is a part of the family God placed in Eden for this purpose, and thus he shares in that purpose.

Specifying the debt owed by humanity in this way reveals consonance between Anselm’s view and what is supposed to be the alternative Christus Victor theory. Satisfaction on Anselm’s terms is most fittingly achieved through a human defeat of the devil, since this is what was taken away by Adam and Eve’s failure. Again, we can see that there is a way in which Anselm provides a different and (in his judgment) logically firmer set of reasons justifying essentially the same claims about what Christ accomplishes, rather than rejecting and replacing a patristic theory about what salvation in Christ is. For Anselm, just as for the patristic tradition, salvation consists in a victory over the devil by one who is both divine and human; Anselm’s rejection of the view (held by some but by no means all of the patristic writers) that Christ’s death frees us by being a ransom payment to justly purchase us from the devil amounts to a difference over why this victory should have taken place in just the way it did.

As we saw in Chapter 2, Gustaf Aulén argued for a sharp distinction between Anselm’s “objective” view and Christus Victor, which he calls the “classic” view, and locates as the central Christian teaching about the atonement in the Patristic period. For Aulén, the most important difference between the Anselmian “objective” theory and the “classic” theory has to do with who performs atonement who receives it. On his reading, the classic view presents atonement as a divine act from start to finish: God reconciles humanity to Himself and is in no way reconciled by a human act. In response to sin, God authorizes a punishment in the form of bondage to the devil, but decides to liberate us from that punishment. The role of humanity is simply to be rescued and, thereby,
reconciled. Anselm, on Aulén’s reading, creates a “break” in the divine act of atonement, since humanity has to make satisfaction in order to for God to forgive. On the classic view, God initiates and carries out our forgiveness from start to finish, while for Anselm God initiates the process, but at some point it becomes an act of Christ’s human nature towards God rather than an act of God towards humanity.\textsuperscript{137}

It is easy enough to see how one might read Anselm this way, but to do so involves significant errors. First, Aulén fails to see the deeply Chalcedonian shape of Anselm’s Christology. If we assign actions to persons rather than natures, then of course there is no possibility of imagining that some parts of Christ’s work are performed by God and others by humanity. But for Anselm (as for the Christological tradition descending from Chalcedon more generally), every act of the Incarnate Word is an act of a divine Person who possesses both a divine and a human nature. Some acts He carries out in virtue of the divine nature and others in virtue of the human, but they are all carried out by the same Person who is God. Granting this semantic/metaphysical rule is enough to show that everything Christ does in Anselm’s story is an act of God—even offering a faithful human life to God to satisfy for human sin. Anselm could not be clearer in following this rule, and also in insisting that the human acts performed by Christ only have their infinite value in virtue of the fact that the Person who performs them is God.\textsuperscript{138}

It is thus essential for Anselm that even in his death, the work of Christ is always the work of God.


\textsuperscript{138} See, for example, Anselm, \textit{CDH}, II.19, “For, granted that it was the action of the man of whom we have spoken and that it may be said that God did it, in view of the unity of his person . . .”
Perhaps more importantly, we can now underline the fact that God is in no way changed by a human act of satisfaction; on the contrary, it is God’s very immutability that calls forth the Incarnation of God’s Word for the purpose of satisfying God’s (unchanging) intentions in making rational creatures. Satisfaction does not act upon God’s intrinsic honor, but restores the perfect reflection of that honor in human nature, just as the restoration of God’s image in human nature does nothing to alter God’s image. God does not demand satisfaction in order to change His attitude towards humanity, but rather provides for satisfaction in order to bring humanity into the state for which it was created. In just this way, we can see the coincidence of God’s justice and his mercy: the fact that we may receive mercy arises from the profound depths of God’s goodness, which intends for humanity not only a state of beatitude but also the dignity of meriting that state through an act of obedience in resistance to the devil. Indeed, though of course God had no need for such an act, Anselm suggests that God called humanity to play a voluntary role in carrying out His justice towards the fallen angels. It is a matter of God’s justice that this vocation should be fulfilled by the human family, and a matter of profound mercy to us that God in Christ brings it to fulfillment despite our sin. Thus, atonement involves a human act—not in order to influence God to be reconciled to us (as Aulén’s reading suggests), but precisely because our sin has failed to influence God to abandon His exceedingly generous intentions for us.

iii. Moral Exemplar

From here, we can move to the third level, namely whatever larger purpose God had in mind that is negatively affected by human failures of will and action. At this more cosmic level, Anselm’s discourse on angels becomes crucial, for it is here that Anselm
articulates in detail his vision of God’s intentions for humanity in relation to the rest of creation. Specifically, God created human beings with the intention that some number of them, having maintained their fundamental purpose of knowing and loving God and (therefore) discharged whatever specific vocation God placed on them, would participate in a harmonious heavenly community along with every other type of creature. The consequences of sin obstruct both of these aims: because all of humanity is affected by the sin of Adam and Eve, no human person can successfully defeat the devil, and, similarly, the weight of sin prevents any human being from entering beatitude unless satisfaction is made. To have human beings exist in beatitude as a part of this intended order is thus taken from God by human sin (or, rather, it would be if there were no means of satisfaction).

So, in addition to recapitulating God’s intentions for human nature, and carrying out God’s intended mission for humanity in resisting the devil, we can add that Christ’s satisfying act needs to restore to God everything that was lost, so that “because of [the victorious human agent] as many humans would be brought out of sin into a state of righteousness as would make up that full number . . . for the completion of which mankind was created.”140 What is required is a defeat of the devil which would lead many out from captivity to sin, as many out as would fully restore the human component of the

139 Anselm, *CDH*, I.16, “It should not be doubted that reasoning beings, who either are happy in the contemplation of God, or shall be happy, exist in a rationally calculated and perfect number known in advance by God. . .” Later on, however, in I.18, Anselm shows that his argument does not depend on there being a perfect number of rational souls in heaven: “But even if the ‘completeness’ of universal creation is not so much to be understood in terms of the number of individuals as in the number of races of creature in nature, it is inevitably the case either that the human race was created for the fulfillment of that ‘completeness’ of creation, or that it is superfluous to it—something which we dare not say of the existence in nature of the smallest worm.”

140 Ibid., I.23.
perfect community which God originally had in mind. This suggests that Anselm’s vision of the atoning work of Christ extends forward in time, from the death and resurrection of Jesus through the spread of the church to the reception of the Gospel by every individual human person who receives it, and is thereby reconciled to God, most especially by being united to Christ’s atoning act through the sacraments.\textsuperscript{141} So, as long as that community is still lacking, it would seem that in one sense Christ’s atoning work is ongoing; he is still restoring to God that which was taken away. In every case in which someone is drawn into right relation to God by the life, teachings, miracles, death and resurrection of Jesus, his satisfying work continues on towards its completion. The human response of repentance and worship thus turns out to be essential by Anselm’s logic, and this provides for the fittingness of Christ’s role as teacher and example. For Anselm, God created human beings in order to be blessedly happy, specifically by understanding, loving, and rejoicing in the good, and above all God who is the highest good.\textsuperscript{142} Clearly, a holy life in which a person subjectively loves and rejoices in God is not a secondary add-on to Anselm’s soteriology. The whole point of what God has done in Christ is to restore human persons to precisely that state.

Notice again how Anselm argues that forgiveness without recompense cannot lead to blessed happiness for human beings:

\textsuperscript{141} One might think that, in Anselm’s scheme, because of Christ’s infinitely meritorious offering to God, the moral balance of the universe is maintained, and no human persons need to be actually redeemed. Put differently, perhaps the Son need not request any reward at all for his offering. But, in fact, for Anselm as for Athanasius, it would be unfitting for God to create humanity with some intention in mind and have that intention go unfulfilled, and it is this very unfittingness that necessitates the Incarnation in order to make forgiveness possible. Moreover, Anselm himself argues that (1) it would be unfitting for there to be no reward for Christ’s faithfulness, (2) Christ himself, lacking nothing, can be given no reward, and (3) it is maximally fitting for Christ to ask that his reward be given to those who are his family and who imitate him. Together, for Anselm, these would seem to carry the force of logical necessity. See \textit{CDH}, II.19.

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., II.1.
[B]lessed happiness is sufficiency in which there is no want . . . so long as [a sinner] does not repay, he will either be wishing to repay, or not wishing to do so. But in the event that he has a desire to do what he is incapable of doing, he will be a person in want: in the event that he does not have the desire he will be a wrongdoer.\textsuperscript{143}

Anselm recognizes here exactly what some of his contemporary detractors think he ignores: that we must in some way be involved in the process of atonement and reconciliation. We cannot be mere spectators, or our reconciliation will not really be appropriate to rational beings who, insofar as they become righteous, will naturally desire to make restitution for the wrongs that they have done. This is why it is essential that atonement be made by a human agent, and in particular a human agent descended from Adam. If not, then the human family descended from Adam “will not be restored up to the dignity which it was to have had . . . Hence it will not be completely restored.”\textsuperscript{144}

Forgiveness without recompense would not lead to the full restoration of God’s good intentions for humanity. This is why forgiving without satisfaction would leave humanity in a state less than the beatitude for which God intended them. It would be unjust, that is, towards God Himself, who created humanity for beatitude, and who, above all, should have His intentions fulfilled. The justice which requires satisfaction, then, is not a requirement external to God forcing Him to make demands he would not otherwise make; it is, rather, God’s own immutable consistency with His own supremely good intentions.\textsuperscript{145}

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., I.24.

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., II.8.

\textsuperscript{145} For an extended and persuasive treatment of justice in Anselm as the consistency of the divine nature with itself, see Cohen, “Patristic Analogues in Anselm of Canterbury’s ‘Cur Deus Homo,’” 68–107.
At any rate, the divine intention that a community of human persons actually reach the beatified state leads Anselm to discern a great fittingness in the fact that the agent of satisfaction turns out not only to be related to us, but also “a sharer in our discomforts”146 who nonetheless teaches and exemplifies perfect faithfulness:

For, who may explain how necessary and wise a thing it was for it to come about that he who was to redeem the human race and bring it back from the way of death and destruction to the way of life and eternal happiness, should live in the company of human beings and, while he was teaching them verbally how they ought to live, should, through his very behavior, present himself as an example? Furthermore, how was he to present himself to weak and mortal humans as an example of the fact that they should not depart from righteousness on account of injustices, insults, pain or death, if they were not aware that he himself had experience of all these things?147

Anselm’s soteriology thus gives an important place to the supposedly alternative “moral exemplar” theory. Christ’s life and teachings are crucial to Anselm precisely because the “transaction” of atonement is aimed at a relational purpose: Christ needs to teach as a human being living and suffering faithfully among human beings so that he can best enable human beings to be restored to that blessed happiness in relation to God for which God himself had created them. It would be odd to suggest, therefore, that Anselm’s view is a rejection of the theory that Christ redeems us by being an inspiring teacher and an example.

On this point, Katherine Sonderegger draws attention to a striking passage in which Boso is led to mirror Christ’s own self-giving love, a passage mirroring Anselm’s arguments for the infinite weight of sin with the infinite worth of the Redeemer:

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146 Anselm, CDH, II.12.

147 Ibid., II.11.
A: If [the God-man] here before you, and you knew who he was, and someone were to say to you, ‘If you did not kill this man, the whole of the universe will perish, and whatever is not God,’ would you do it to preserve the whole of the rest of creation?

B: I would not do it, even if an infinite number of universes were offered to me.

A: What if someone were to follow this up by saying, “Either you will kill him or all the sins of the world will come upon you’?

B. I would answer that I would rather take upon myself all other sins, not just all the sins of this universe—both those committed in the past and those to be committed in the future—but whatever sins can be conceived of as existing in addition to these. And I think I ought to make this answer not only with regard to the act of killing him, but with respect to any small injury whatsoever which would harm him.148

As Sonderegger elegantly comments,

The gravity of sin is now mirrored in the preciousness of the Restorer; the pride of saving worlds in Eden matched by the humble obedience and self-offering of Christ and imitated by the self-giving love of the disciple. The ‘objective atonement’ is realized, confessed and repeated in the ‘subjective love’ of the believer.149

The text of CDH does, therefore, present Christ as a saving example, for he reveals the gravity of sin as well as the lengths we ought to go to avoid it or repair its effects, and, moreover, he inspires the love that of God that constitutes righteousness. So much, then, for the notion that Anselm does not account for the subjective side of the reconciliation of human beings to God, or that he includes it only as an ad hoc attachment. If Christ is to make proper satisfaction to God, given the nature of what was lost, it is extremely fitting that he should be an effective teacher and exemplar, inspiring human persons to love God and to live in faithful relationship to him. So much, too, for the idea that Anselm appeals

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148 Anselm, CDH, I.14.

to an impersonal or abstract kind of justice that requires a merely forensic transaction in order for God to forgive. The justice at work in CDH is one that moves God to rescue us from the estrangement we had brought on ourselves by utter solidarity with us, and to restore in us by that solidarity the blessed life for which we were created.

There are also intimations social and even ecological aspect to Anselm’s thought. He offers a richly aesthetic vision of an ordered universe, and of the place of rational creatures within it. This vision includes not only the way in which creatures relate to God, but also how they relate to each other. For Anselm, God’s intention is a world in which “every created thing would be happy, each in its own way joining in the eternal rejoicing in its Creator and in itself and in their mutual relation to one another.” Even if he does not develop the implications of what he suggests here in much detail, the intention Anselm attributes to God includes as an essential piece the notion of ordered and joyful community between human persons, and between human persons and the rest of creation. God envisions and intends not just individual righteous humans but a community whose perfection lies in the harmonious relations of its diverse constituent members, a community that includes not just human beings, but angels and creatures of all kinds. The consummation of this community is in Anselm’s view delayed until the full number of human beings has been redeemed. Hence, it seems one of the divine

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150 Anselm, CDH., I.18. Emphasis added. See also, Anselm, Proslogion, 25, where Anselm suggests that each of the blessed will rejoice to the same degree in the beatitude of each other as in her own.

151 Lest we worry overmuch about the idea of a perfect number, it is worth noticing that Anselm says, “But even if the ‘completeness’ of universal creation is not so much to be understood in terms of the number of individuals as in the number of races of creature in nature, it is inevitably the case either that the human race was created for the fulfillment of that ‘completeness’ of creation, or that it is superfluous to it—something which we dare not say of the existence in nature of the smallest worm. Consequently, the human race was created . . . for its own sake . . .” CDH., I.18. It thus appears that for Anselm the concept of the perfect number of blessed human beings may simply stand in for whatever it is in which the perfection that God has in mind actually consists, be it a number or something else.
intentions taken away by sin—and thus a needed element in satisfaction—is the establishment of this cosmic vision of harmonious relations between all things. Since the aim of satisfaction is to restore everything that was lost vis-à-vis God’s intentions, then what should finally result from the act of satisfaction is a community of truth, justice, peace, and love. The healing of human relationships broken by sin therefore has to be seen as a part of what is accomplished in Christ. So, too, does the healing of broken relations between humanity and creation.

**Conclusion**

To sum up the argument I have made in this chapter: in order to read Anselm as offering a new theory of atonement to be set in competition with other theories, one has to ignore his own explicit understanding of his intellectual task and his relationship to the Fathers. Not only so, but one has to ignore the fundamentally theological way Anselm himself fills out his apparently feudal or purely juridical concepts, as well as the metaphysical and theological background music presented in his earlier treatises. In doing so, one misses the significant conceptual connections his account of the atonement has with other so-called atonement theories. David Bentley Hart is right, therefore, in saying:

> Anselm is already situated in the Christian theological tradition, he already knows that Christ has recapitulated human nature in himself and conquered evil on our behalf; it is from this narrative that Anselm has undertaken a (by no means final or exclusive) reduction of the tale, in order better to grasp the inner necessity of its sacrificial logic.\(^\text{152}\)

To this we can add that Anselm also certainly knew that Christ frees us from sin by his teaching and example, and that this, too, he has attempted to connect to the logic by which the Incarnation is necessary and fitting.

\(^{152}\) Hart, “A Gift Exceeding Every Debt,” 344.
The common reading of Anselm, namely that in *CDH* he is offering a discrete theory of atonement to be set in competition with other theories, is thus undermined by a careful reading of *CDH*. Instead, it appears that Anselm is offering support to a broader and richer vision of salvation that is quite explicitly compatible with other traditional explanations of Christ’s atoning work. Anselm attempts to provide a certain kind of logical grounding to a rich set of elemental theological claims which he takes more or less as given. Or, more precisely, in the context of *CDH*, he takes them as part of what he is supposed to demonstrate as necessary and fitting. The atonement theory paradigm has often led directly to the assumption that the conflict between atonement theories is over what sort of act Christ’s atoning work is. On the contrary, Anselm offers us a sustained engagement not with the question of what Christ’s atoning work is, but with the question of why that work is fitting, necessary, and true. The results of his efforts stand the test of time much better than some have recognized; at the very least, he provides a compelling basis for those who would try to move beyond the atonement theory paradigm today.

It has often been suggested that the doctrine of atonement is unique in that the Church has largely avoided canonizing a particular understanding of it. Unlike the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, or the nature of Christ, which have been nailed down in great detail in the form of creedal and conciliar statements, atonement theology is open to a diverse array of theories, of which we may select one or perhaps some combination and remain within the bounds of orthodoxy. What we have observed in Anselm, however, suggests that there is a strikingly rich set of elemental claims at the core of atonement theology which Anselm did not see himself as within his theological rights to discard. He applies the concepts of debt and satisfaction in innovative ways, to be sure, but he does
think he can discard the claim that Christ came to defeat the devil and rescue humanity from sin, or that Christ is our teacher and example, or that Christ came to recapitulate human life in a way completely faithful to God’s intentions for humankind, or that Christ gave himself as a perfect offering to the Father. These are the claims he struggles to hold together intelligibly, whose inner logic he strives to grasp. These are for him matters of faith about which he seeks understanding.

In rejecting the claim that the devil had a legitimate right to hold human beings in bondage, a right which God could not justly override, Anselm rejects one traditional explanation of how God’s justice is on display at the Cross, but he does not question whether God’s justice is on display at the Cross. He argues that God’s justice is not on display in the form of fairness towards Satan, but instead in His integrity towards His own supremely good and beautiful intentions for Creation. But this is not a dispute about what Christ’s atonement is, whether it includes the liberation of humanity from the devil. It is a dispute about how and why salvation is what it is, why, and on what sort of basis viz. justice, it includes the liberation of humanity from the devil. In the same way, in the *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, Anselm does not innovate a new vision of who or what God is, or at least, if he did, this result is contrary to his aims. He maintains, of course, that God is omnipotent, omniscient, merciful, just, etc., and that He is Triune. Instead, he develops a new way to articulate the concept of God which displays His existence and possession of the divine attributes as implicit and necessary in the very concept itself. If one were to show Anselm that his proof did not lead to the God revealed in the Christian tradition but to something else, he surely would have faulted his own proof rather than shifting his understanding of who God is and what God is like. We can now see that the
same must be true when it comes to Anselm’s approach to atonement. He is still engaged in *fides quaerens intellectum*, and the *fides* in this case provides a thick set of claims just as it does in the case of the doctrine of God; *intellectum* consists not in the what of the *fides*, but in the why and how.

Perhaps from this point of view we could come to see a rich and deep soteriological vision at the heart of the Christian faith—a vision to which Anselm and indeed many other pre-modern theologians of the atonement were all essentially committed, even as they elaborated and systematized it differently. In light of such a vision, contemporary reflection on the atonement in and for the church could gain a kind of unity which to this point has been lacking, precisely because we have imagined our task to be that of establishing what Christ’s atoning work is rather than why it is true, fitting, and beautiful. Reading Anselm this way, at any rate, turns out to undermine a great many criticisms which have been leveled against him, in particular by putting his theory in a position to draw on the insights of the prior tradition rather than having to compete with them. Anselm thus provides a rich and promising starting point for atonement theology beyond the atonement theory paradigm.

Finally, let us briefly summarize the account of atonement we have discovered in Anselm, with a view to noticing the way it fits with his overall theology, and the way it provides a logical structure into which other classical ‘theories’ can be neatly fit. God creates human beings with specific intentions. Given in human nature is the end of knowing and loving God for God’s own sake; this end reflects the divine intention in creating human beings foreknown in the Word, the agent of creation. Human beings are meant to pursue this end, reflecting thereby an image of their Creator. As a reward for
this faithful use of their most distinctive capacities, they would participate in a beautiful, harmonious community with all the rest of Creation. Before the beginning of humanity, however, angels fell—the first creatures to reject God’s will. In light of their fall, God calls the first human beings to a concrete act of obedience, namely resisting the temptation offered by the devil. Humans are thus invited to play a voluntary and active role in the expression and establishment of God’s justice in the created order over and against the fallen angels. For this concrete act of obedience (perhaps along with other, subsequent acts), God intended to reward humanity with beatitude, the sharing of Himself with them in friendship, fulfilling and satisfying their will to know and love Him above all things, and, moreover, on Anselm’s telling, to allow many human beings to fill out the intended number of the community of the Blessed to make up the number of angels who fell.

The first human beings gave into the devil’s temptation, however, and thus gave themselves over to his power and lost their original rectitude. God’s supremely good intentions for humanity is, however, immutable; it is unfitting, even unjust to God, that these intentions should be entirely unfulfilled. For the human family descended from Adam and Eve to be left to the power of the devil would mean that they were created for nothing. On the other hand, the immutability of God’s good intentions also rules out the possibility of ‘mere’ forgiveness. Giving humanity what was meant to be a reward for a proper exercise of their rational natures expressed in a concrete act of obedience absent that proper exercise, that act of obedience, would be to abandon God’s intentions for humanity just as surely as leaving them to damnation. Human persons forgiven in this
way would themselves long to know that the vocation God gave to the human family was fulfilled.

In the Incarnation of Christ, therefore, God supplies what is needed to fulfill His good intentions, in spite of sin. In the life of the man Jesus, God’s intentions for human nature are recapitulated, uttered anew into the history fallen humanity. Christ perfectly embodies what it means for humanity to love God above all things. Through Christ’s willingness to resist the devil out of love and faithfulness even unto death, humanity fulfills the concrete debt of obedience Adam and Eve failed to render. Indeed, Christ’s self-offering goes infinitely beyond what Adam and Eve could have done, infinitely outweighing all of humanity’s sin. The merit due to Christ’s act is then shared at his behest with all of those who join their wills to his, and who are thereby able to offer his faithfulness on their behalf. These redeemed persons are now brought into a bond of loyalty and friendship to Christ, and therefore also to his Father and to everyone else who is joined to him. Through Christ’s teaching and example, the faithful also learn how they ought to love God above all things. Likewise, they are enabled to enter beatitude and take their place in the harmonious community God intended in creating. Thus, Christ is God’s perfectly satisfying self-utterance, God’s expression of His will in and for human flesh in such a way that His intentions are fully satisfied, every debt discharged.

In Christ’s work of satisfaction, God’s justice and mercy are brought together. In his life, his resistance to the devil, and his willingness to offer his own life on behalf of humanity, Christ fulfills God’s just vocation for humanity, and sets right the damage wrought by human sin; he is humanity’s perfect offering to God. At the same, he is God’s perfect gift to humanity, God’s very life given at great cost into our sinful history in order
to draw us up to God’s supremely good intentions for us. In this, God gives us a gift beyond what we could ever deserve or merit; God’s justice to Himself is profound mercy to us, motivated by His unchanging will for us to fulfill the vocation set out for us in the divine will from eternity.

In Chapter 4, we will move forward from this account, developed through a careful re-reading of Anselm, and develop it further in light of helpful elaborations and critiques to Anselm’s atonement theology presented in the thought of Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus. At this point, I will shift from re-reading Anselm to offering my own solutions to ambiguities and critiques of Anselm in order to develop my own constructive proposal. I will not carry over every aspect of Anselm’s thought that has been unpacked here; what will result is a vision of the atonement that is (hopefully) Anselmian but goes beyond Anselm’s own work. In Chapter 5, I will then argue that the theology of atonement I have developed can offer successful responses to important contemporary critiques of satisfaction accounts.
CHAPTER 4
THOMAS AQUINAS AND ANSELM

In [liberating humanity through Christ’s Passion], God manifested greater mercy than if he had forgiven sins without requiring satisfaction.

Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, IIIa q.46 a.2 ad.3.*

In the scholastic period immediately following Anselm’s work, his thought on satisfaction was influential, though it was not accepted wholesale. The critiques and elaborations offered by the scholastics are quite different from the ones that have concerned modern and contemporary readers of Anselm, but they turn out to be instructive and illuminating for the purpose of developing a workable satisfaction account of the atonement. Thomas Aquinas’s treatment of the doctrine of atonement thus provides a helpful counterpoint in various ways; at some points, he offers a needed corrective, while at others he provides a helpful clarification or elaboration. At still others, analysis of a dispute between Thomas and Anselm helps to show where a satisfaction account may admit of multiple possible ways forward.

We will first consider the similarities and differences between Thomas and Anselm with respect to the appropriate methodology for reflection on the atonement, especially around the difficult question of necessity and fittingness. Some recent thinkers

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hold that Thomas’s position is more conducive to an appreciation of the full diversity of concepts that can illuminate the atonement, as well as more adequately allowing for divine freedom; here we shall attempt to give Anselm’s position a full hearing, which will allow us to see more clearly the way satisfaction functions for Anselm as the basic logic underneath the entire array of atonement concepts, rather than a single step that crowds out the importance of others. On the other hand, Thomas nonetheless provides an important contrast to Anselm, especially when it comes to confidence about the capacity of human judgment to conceive of and evaluate the relative fittingness of range of possibilities potentially open to God in light of His omnipotence and freedom. Attention to this disagreement can also help us to distinguish the Anselmian account of atonement we are developing in this project from a straightforward reproduction of every aspect of Anselm’s thought on the matter.

From there, we move on to consider two aspects of Christ’s work that Thomas draws out in more detail than Anselm: the role that various aesthetic and almost literary connections can play in opening up the beauty and fittingness of the way God has worked our salvation in Christ, and the intimate connection between satisfaction and friendship with God. Having navigated these elaborations and disputes, we will be in a position to articulate a revised satisfaction account, one which allows for a more breadth on than we could get from reading Anselm alone. In Chapter 5, we can then proceed to the question of how this revised account holds up under contemporary critiques of satisfaction accounts.
I. Thomas’s Approach to Atonement in the Summa Theologiae

In questions 46-50 of the Tertia Pars of Summa Theologiae, Thomas develops his interpretation of Christ’s saving work at the Cross. As Adam Johnson has recently argued, Thomas’s account of atonement is fundamentally synthetic: he incorporates to some extent elements now associated with different theories of atonement. These questions come in the midst of a section of the work of Christ; Thomas’ synthetic and systematic tendencies are displayed in the fact that he moves from Christ’s birth, to his teachings and miracles, on to the Passion, through his death, burial, and resurrection, finding saving significance all the way through. When Aquinas proceeds to consider the modes through which the Passion in particular is effective for salvation, he develops meticulously a synthetic account of atonement, including concepts of merit, atonement, sacrifice, and redemption, and provides an argument that Christ’s passion is instrumentally efficient in bringing about the salvation of humanity. Thus, in addition to merit and satisfaction, and the teaching and example provided by them (about which we will say more below), Thomas adds that the Passion is effective through the modes of sacrifice and redemption. In the Passion, Christ offers a sacrifice insofar as he offers a voluntary act of charity oriented towards unity with God. Indeed, Christ’s offering can be seen as the sacrifice of which the prior sacrificial system was the prefiguring. Following Augustine, Aquinas identifies the crucial elements of a sacrifice to be the one who offers it, the thing offered, the one to whom it is offered, and the one for whom it is offered; the

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155 Thomas Aquinas, ST IIIa q. 48.
concept of sacrifice reveals the perfection of Christ’s mediatory role in that he is perfectly united to the one to whom the sacrifice is offered and to the ones for whom it is offered, and that he both is the one who offers and is himself the sacrifice that is offered. In Christ, what are separate aspects of prior sacrifices are embodied all together in one person.156

It is appropriate to say that Christ’s passion effects salvation through redemption insofar as God justly allowed humanity to be in bondage to Satan (even though Satan had no just claim on humanity), and insofar as Christ’s passion represents an exceedingly costly price (albeit, one that is not paid to Satan, but it is nonetheless paid in order to free us from Satan).157 Thomas also takes the opportunity at this point to articulate how it is that it is proper to attribute the efficient cause of our salvation through the passion to Christ in particular, as well as to the Trinity as a whole, again showing that an account of atonement involving satisfaction involves no “break” in the divine act of salvation, no point at which we cannot attribute Christ’s saving work to God. As Thomas makes clear, it was through the instrumental efficient cause of Christ’s flesh, proper to him as a human person, that the Triune God acts as the principal efficient agent to bring about salvation.

In sum, Thomas’s account of the atoning effects of Christ’s Passion is captured thus:

When Christ’s passion is viewed in relation to his divinity, it can be seen to act in an efficient way; in relation to the will which is rooted in Christ’s [human] soul, by way of merit; in relation to the very flesh of Christ, by way of satisfaction, since we are freed by it from the guilt of punishment; by way of redemption, inasmuch as we are thereby freed from the slavery

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156 Ibid., IIIa q.48 a. 3.

157 Ibid., IIIa q. 48 a. 4 ad. 3.
of sin; and finally, by way of sacrifice, thanks to which we are reconciled to God . . .

In his synthetic approach, Thomas is plainly aimed at preserving as much he can of the language about Christ’s saving work that was present in the tradition he received as authoritative. Perhaps it is because he does not so much generate a new controlling concept of his own that he is not given a primary place in the history of the doctrine of atonement. But, arguably, the way he elaborates and systematizes so much of what came before him makes him a compelling challenge to the atonement theory paradigm, as well as an example for those who would take a different route. A comprehensive synthesis can allow the atonement theologian to retrieve modes of discourse about Christ’s saving work that perhaps do not bear in an obvious way on contemporary controversies, but nonetheless open up the beauty and wisdom God’s saving acts to the faithful. If theology is faith seeking understanding, it is crucial not to give up what understanding has been achieved by prior generations. When it comes to the doctrine of atonement, synthesis, as (I argue) both Thomas and Anselm show, would seem to be more likely than selection or replacement to succeed in receiving and preserving what understanding has been achieved in the past, and thereby offer to the Church the fullest possible understanding of the faith. By devoting some attention here to the account he offers in the Summa, I hope to provide a small corrective to the tendency among theologians writing about the doctrine of atonement to leave Thomas out; attending to Thomas with some care in conversation with Anselm will serve to further some ongoing debates about how best to appreciate the full wisdom, goodness, justice, and mercy displayed in Christ’s atoning

\[158\] Ibid. IIIa q. 48 a. 6 ad. 3.
work—in particular, whether Anselm’s concept of necessity, or his use of satisfaction as an undergirding principle, prevent a full appreciation of aspects of Christ’s work expressed in other concepts.

In the last chapter, I argued that Anselm’s approach to the doctrine of atonement is also a synthesis of the tradition he received, rather than a new, alternative theory. As we can see, Thomas’s synthesis in the *Summa Theologiae* takes a markedly different shape. Johnson argues that the reasons for these differences lie around Thomas’s developments on Anselm’s concept of fittingness¹⁵⁹ and his rejection of Anselm’s goal (and conclusion) of discovering a necessary reason behind the Incarnation. It is Thomas’s focus on fittingness (along with his explicit use of biblical and creedal material, rejecting Anselm’s *remoto Christi* approach), Johnson argues, that “cultivates sensitivity to the multiplicity of effects accomplished by Christ’s death,” while “the concept of necessity tends by nature to collapse into the search for a single explanatory concept . . . resulting in an atrophied witness.”¹⁶⁰

In light of our reinterpretation of Anselm, however, we can contest some aspects of Johnson’s analysis. For one thing, we can note that Anselm’s aim of necessity does not actually leave him any less able than Thomas to take on board a diverse array of atonement concepts handed onto him by earlier tradition. As we saw in the last chapter, Anselm includes in an explicit (if abbreviated) way the elements of *Christus Victor* and

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¹⁵⁹ As we will note below, Johnson helpfully notes the way Thomas makes “fittingness” more narrow and precise. Anselm uses the concept of fittingness to frame his analysis of how three factors, God’s nature, God’s purpose for human beings, and the fallen condition of humanity, bear on what God might do, while Thomas uses it mostly to describe the bringing together of various effects towards a single end. Johnson, “A Fuller Account,” 304–5.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 307.
moral exemplar, and that the overall structure of his account is striking in its similarity to patristic accounts like Irenaeus’s concept of recapitulation and Athanasius’s concept of restoring the *imago Dei*. The question of whether these elements are best appreciated through an Anselmian sort of synthesis or a Thomistic one is worth asking, but in any case it is important to appreciate that Anselm’s theory does in fact incorporate these themes, and it does so in a way that is plainly open to elaboration, even if Anselm’s own purposes precluded him from doing so in the text of *CDH*.

Even so, Thomas does approach the question in a more systematic and comprehensive way than Anselm, and this allows him to make the diversity of effects of Christ’s work more visible. In this, Thomas provides a more natural example to contemporary theologians, methodologically speaking, than Anselm’s *remoto Christi* approach—though the latter has its own distinctive virtues as well. In any case, we will begin by examining the question of necessity and fittingness and how we should interpret and evaluate the differences between Thomas and Anselm on it. This will lead us into another point of dispute, namely how to interpret the concept of satisfaction within Christ’s work of atonement. Is it merely a step on the way to atonement and salvation, as Thomas treats it? Or, as I will suggest, can we discern in Anselm’s concept of satisfaction a sort of underlying logic that provides an explanation for all of the diverse effects of Christ’s work? From there, we will be in a position to attempt an epistemic qualification of Anselm’s position in light of Thomas. We can then observe several points at which Thomas’s approach allows for significant and helpful elaboration relative to Anselm.
II. Thomas and Anselm on Necessity and Fittingness

Thomas moves his reflection on the Passion according to a characteristically tight logical progression: he begins with the necessity and fittingness of the Passion, moves to the efficient cause, and then to the modes by which the Passion operates. We can briefly consider what he says about each of these in turn, beginning with the question of necessity and fittingness. For Aquinas, the Passion is known to be necessary only in light of God’s will and foreknowledge indicated in revelation, and then can only be called ‘necessary’ as a fitting means to the particular end of salvation. While Anselm likewise insists that the necessity he attributes to satisfaction is not a matter of compulsion, he nonetheless does affirm that there was no other more fitting way for God to save, and therefore, in virtue of God’s own perfect nature, salvation by satisfaction is necessary. Thomas agrees that Christ’s Passion is in fact a maximally fitting means to the end of human salvation. Citing Augustine, he argues that saving by the particular means God chose is supremely fitting because the diverse means that come into play in it are all helpful towards the end of delivering humanity from sin. Here, Thomas defines the concept of fittingness more precisely than Anselm: “A means is the more appropriate [convenientior] for an end, as it brings together more assets towards the end.” For the means of Christ’s Passion to be supremely fitting as a means of salvation, then, would mean for it to bring together a maximal array of assets towards the end of salvation. Even

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161 ST IIIa q. 46 a. 1-2.

162 Ibid., IIIa q. 46 a. 3, corpus.
so, Thomas’s concern to preserve divine freedom and omnipotence prevents him from following Anselm’s inference from the supreme fittingness to necessity.\textsuperscript{163}

This raises difficult questions. For Aquinas, it is certainly not within the realm of possibility that God could do that which is, in fact, less than supremely fitting (and, indeed, Thomas insists that there was not a better way for God to work our salvation\textsuperscript{164}). In Johnson’s terms, it cannot be possible that God does what fails to “best express God’s delight in His being” or what does not “bring about the fullest array of resources towards accomplishing our salvation”\textsuperscript{165} Given God’s supreme goodness, wisdom, and justice, it still seems that, necessarily, He does what is most fitting. Let us grant that, as Bruce Marshall suggests in his interpretation of Aquinas on this point, God “is free to look out for his own interests as he sees fit,”\textsuperscript{166} a claim with which Anselm would surely agree. The question then is what, after all, would God see fit to do viz. His own interests? So long as we deny that could God could see fit to follow a course of action which is actually less fitting than another, we are left with the conclusion that, necessarily, God does only what is maximally fitting. If anything, as Johnson suggests, Thomas’s method appears to take it as a given that if God is revealed to have done something, then there

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{163} As Torrell puts it in discussing Thomas’s use of arguments from fittingness, “\textit{Eu égard à cette souveraine liberté de Dieu, ce moyen approprié ne comporte aucune nécessité absolue, ce n’est qu’un moyen possible parmi d’autres possibles . . .}” Jean-Pierre Torrell, \textit{Le Christ En Ses Mystéres: La Vie et L’œuvre de Jésus Selon Saint Thomas d’Aquín}, Collection “Jésus et Jésus-Christ,” no 78-79 (Paris: Desclée, 1999), 35.
  \item \textsuperscript{164} Thomas Aquinas, \textit{ST} IIIa. q. 46 a. 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{165} Johnson, “A Fuller Account,” 313.
  \item \textsuperscript{166} Marshall, “Debt, Punishment, and Payment: A Meditation on the Cross, in Light of St. Anselm,” 174.
\end{itemize}
can be nothing more fitting for God to have done.\textsuperscript{167} What can make such an inference valid except the premise that, necessarily, God does what is most fitting, what best expresses His delight in His own being, what brings the fullest array of resources towards accomplishing our salvation?

Given the premise that God does only what is most fitting, we can ask a further question. If satisfaction is included in the fullest possible array of resources, and, therefore, and if salvation including satisfaction is, therefore, more fitting than salvation without it, does it not follow that, necessarily, God saves via satisfaction? Granting that to save via satisfaction is truly more fitting than to have saved without satisfaction, as Johnson indeed seems to do, what could it mean to say that God could possibly have done the latter, except that it is open to God to do what is less than the most fitting, to do what less than fully expresses His delight in His own being? No, it would seem that if for Thomas these two premises hold, namely that, necessarily, God does what is most fitting, and, it was more fitting for God to save through an act of satisfaction than to save by mere forgiveness, then Anselm’s conclusion follows that, necessarily, God would save through an act of satisfaction, precisely because, necessarily, God chooses the most fitting means to His ends, and not less fitting ones.

The way to preserve space to coherently reject that the necessity that God does only what is most fitting can be applied to a particular maximally fitting course of action would be to imagine that there are (or at least may be) many maximally fitting

\textsuperscript{167} Since, as he says, for Thomas, the task of theology is to discover the way that divine action in the atonement “yields the most abundant array of effects contributing to our salvation,” which is to say, the way it was the most fitting means for salvation. For theology to proceed this way, it would seem, it must assume that in fact what God has done is necessarily maximally fitting, so that it may then seek to discover more and more how this is so.
possibilities open to God rather than just one. This seems a good way to make sense of
Thomas’s rejection of necessity in the sense Anselm affirms it. For Thomas, as William
Courtenay suggests, “God’s wisdom, goodness, and justice could have found expression
in some other preordained system. The present order is . . . a product of the divine will; it
does what is best would not, then, necessitate any individual course of action, but it
would still necessitate one course of action from the set of maximally fitting ones. In this
case, Thomas is right to say that God does not carry out the specific course of action He
does by necessity. On the other hand, even if the divine wisdom might well be displayed
in many possible maximally fitting acts, it still seems that any course of action that is less
than maximally fitting could not be the product of the divine wisdom. It follows from this
that any reason for the fittingness of what God has done of the sort that involves the
implication that some other course of action would have been less fitting is, at the same
time, a reason why God would not do the less fitting one. So, again, if salvation via
satisfaction (for instance) is genuinely more fitting, all else being equal, than saving
without satisfaction, then it still would seem to follow that God will save via satisfaction
rather than not. Every means of salvation genuinely open to God, that is, would include
satisfaction. The same logic would apply to the Incarnation if it is indeed more fitting for
salvation to come through it than not, and so on, for every detail.

To identify multiple possibilities equally open to God, then, given that God only
does what is maximally fitting, one would have to grant that some facets of God’s action
to save are genuinely indifferent viz. fittingness rather than adding to it substantially, or that there are facets which are mutually exclusive with other, equally fitting possibilities. It would seem odd to say that the Incarnation itself fits in this category; it is hard to imagine that there are other possibilities which are mutually exclusive with the Incarnation which are also equally fitting with it. But likewise, it would also seem surprising if this were true of salvation by satisfaction. On Anselm’s analysis, of course, there is either satisfaction, or there is mere forgiveness, or there is no salvation at all. Granting Anselm’s premise that a sinner made just would desire to make satisfaction, then satisfaction would be necessary because it is actually constitutive of salvation for sinners. Anselm rejects mere forgiveness as, properly understood, not a route to beatitude at all.

Although he does not follow Anselm’s reasoning on this, Thomas, too, gives arguments that seem to weigh against the notion that salvation by mere forgiveness would be just as fitting as salvation including satisfaction: Thomas argues that “greater mercy is manifested [by saving through satisfaction] than if [God] had forgiven sins without requiring satisfaction.” Here we face the same implication: either God could do what manifests less mercy, or it would follow that God would not do something other than save through an act of satisfaction. Granted that, perhaps, one might argue that God need not manifest as much mercy as He has in fact done, and, indeed, that He could have manifested even more mercy than He did, had He chosen to do so. Still, if the level of

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169 Indeed, it seems more plausible that, as John Duns Scotus would later argue, the Incarnation is so supremely beautiful that it is more valuable than the salvation of sinners, and so the Incarnation itself would have a necessity that is logically prior within the divine will to the decision to save sinners.

170 ST IIIa q. 46 a. 1 ad. 3.
mercy displayed in God’s actions is truly no more fitting than any other level of mercy He might have displayed, then Thomas’s argument seems to lose its relevance. The objection Thomas is responding to is to the effect that the Passion is in no way necessary because it neither displays God’s mercy as fully as it could, and nor is it required by God’s justice (more on which below); if in fact the extent of mercy God displays is irrelevant to the fittingness or necessity of God’s actions (if, that is, any level of mercy God chose would have been equally fitting), Thomas would have needed to attach that qualification. “Satisfaction is indeed more merciful,” he could perhaps have said, “but this fact does not render mere forgiveness a less fitting alternative for God compared to the satisfaction Christ offered in the Passion.” But if that is true, then it would follow that the Passion was not necessary over and against mere forgiveness, even in the sense Thomas specifies, i.e., as a more fitting means to the end of salvation. It would simply be an option God could choose, with no increased fittingness contingent on choosing it such that not choosing it would be less fitting.

Perhaps, though, beyond the Incarnation itself and the question of satisfaction, there are many particular details of God’s saving work in Christ that could be replaced with other equally fitting alternatives. The various fitting parallels that appear in scripture as a result of how God chose to save, mentioned by Anselm at the beginning of \textit{CDH}, could be candidates for this category.\footnote{\textit{CDH}, I.3-4.} It seems likely that Anselm would have thought that these fitting connections really are constitutive elements of the single maximally
fitting course of action, but that they cannot be known or demonstrated to have been so without directly appeal to the fact that God in fact acted in such a way as to produce them, whereas, he takes his other arguments to demonstrate the necessity of the Incarnation without direct appeal to the fact that God enacted it. There is in Anselm, then, at least a hint of an epistemic distinction here: some elements of Christ’s work can be known to be necessarily present within any maximally fitting means of salvation, while others can only be known to be maximally fitting after the fact of God’s having carried them out.

God’s freedom is, of course, a fundamental concern for Thomas on this issue, as is the related theme of the absolute gratuity of grace; these interrelated concerns seem to motivate Thomas’s insistence on stopping short of Anselmian necessity viz. the Incarnation. So it is worthwhile to consider whether Anselm’s inference to necessity really does constrain divine freedom, or detract from grace’s gratuity. Anselm engages this question explicitly in CDH. Boso raises an objection to Anselm’s argument that God will necessarily save some human beings (because it would be unfitting for God’s

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172 Katherin Rogers, for instance, provides compelling (not to say decisive) arguments that for Anselm God does not appear to have options, even when it comes to creating the world. As she notes, Anselm’s strong sense of the supreme fittingness of the world God actually has made, combined with the principle that God cannot do what is less than the most fitting seems to support this conclusion, especially when we add to this the fact that Anselm goes to some length to deny that options are necessary for freedom. Even so, as she admits, Anselm does not appear to affirm this anywhere, and (as we shall see further on) the examples Anselm gives in CDH to defend God’s grace as free even though necessary both involve a voluntarily accepted constraint (by taking a vow or making a promise). Katherin Rogers, Anselm on Freedom (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 185–205.

173 This point is suggestive of a broader epistemic facet of this dispute: even if it is true that God does what is best, and that this particular course of action was the best available, so God necessarily does it, given God’s transcendent power and wisdom, it could be that finite intellects could never be in a position to adequately evaluate the options which might be open to God so as to judge that this was so (absent revelation that in fact He did it). We will return to this possibility below.
purposes in creating humanity to utterly fail); here the objection focuses on the gratuity of grace:

But if this is so [that God of necessity that God will bring to completion what he began in creating humanity], God seems, as it were, to be forced to bring about the salvation of mankind by the necessity of avoiding unfittingness. How can it be denied, therefore, that he is taking this action for his own sake rather than ours? Again, if this is the case, what gratitude [gratia] do we owe him for this thing which he is doing for his own sake? Furthermore, how is it that we are to attribute our salvation to his grace [gratia], if it is of necessity that he saves us?174

Anselm’s reply is to distinguish the sort of necessity that reduces the gratitude merited by an act from another kind of necessity which, on his analysis, actually increases the gratitude merited. Necessity provided by external compulsion is of the former kind, but what exactly does Anselm have in mind in the latter case? He describes it as necessity to which one freely becomes subject, and to which one freely adheres. He provides two examples: making a promise to give a gift in the future, and taking a vow of holy living. In these cases, he says, one accepts a kind of necessity which was not there before: now, if one does not carry out what was promised, one will be a liar. To avoid being a liar, it is now necessary to give the gift, or to adhere to one’s vows. But in these cases, we should not conclude that the gratitude merited by the relevant actions is reduced, so long as the person carrying them out still does so willingly. Quite the opposite. Anselm observes that in the case of such promises one gives up more than one would simply by giving the gift or carrying out a monastic life: one has taken these things on as a matter of obligation, and therefore given up not just the actual fact of doing

174 Anselm, CDH, II.5.
otherwise, but also permission to do so. Even so, whatever one does in fulfillment of such a promise continues to be as gratuitous as the initial promise.

It is striking that both of the examples Anselm chooses involve entering voluntarily into a kind of relationship to another. One could easily add the example of marriage vows and it would not be out of place. The idea seems to be, then, that God enters into a kind of relationship by creating. He does so freely, but by doing so, voluntarily puts Himself into a position He would not otherwise be in, since He will act towards Creation in a way that comports with His nature. The purposes built into created natures now form a kind of obligation on God’s part, but an obligation that is first of all to Himself, because it is, after all, His intentions for creatures that He is obligated to bring to fulfillment. At the same time, for Anselm, God’s intentions in creating cannot be otherwise than those ends which are intrinsically good and appropriate for created natures, because He is Goodness itself, and thus the natural orientation of creatures towards good and appropriate ends is an orientation towards Himself.

Ultimately, on Anselm’s telling, there can be no real distinction between the fact of the goodness of God’s intentions (in virtue of which He is obligated, so to speak, to carry them out) and the fact of their being genuinely good for creation itself, although, metaphysically, the former has to be understood as more fundamental. God’s goodwill towards His creatures, this is to say, is rooted metaphysically in His own immutable goodness—His commitment, as it were, to do what is in conformity with His own nature for the sake of that nature. This commitment on God’s part can be said to be obligatory only in relation to Himself, not to creatures. In conformity to God’s nature, however, the will of God is a genuinely good will towards creatures; it is a will that they should
achieve, generally speaking, the ends which are implicit in created natures, and that they should play the (necessarily good) part which He intended them to play within creation. It is to this good will, according to Anselm, that we owe gratitude for every good thing. All that is to say that if God is so perfectly good that His very goodness will not leave open the possibility that He would allow His creation to fail utterly to reach the good end for which He created it, then, as Anselm says, we ought to be even more grateful than if His goodness were somewhat less, so that He might well have seen fit not to provide a means to beatitude, the end for which He created human beings. This is what Anselm argues in a striking passage, where he concludes that in fact God is even more to be thanked because He saves by an internal, voluntarily accepted necessity:

Consequently, despite the fact that it is not fitting for God to fail to bring to completion a good beginning, we ought all the more to attribute it entirely to his grace if he completes the act of beneficence towards mankind which he has begun, seeing that he has begun it for our sake, not for his own, being himself in need of nothing. For it was no secret to God what man was going to do, when he created him, and yet, by his own goodness in creating him, he put himself under an obligation to bring his good beginning to fulfillment. . . . And when we say that God is performing some action as if out of a necessary obligation to avoid what is dishonourable—something of which he certainly has no fear—what we should understand, rather, is that he is acting thus out of a necessary obligation to uphold what is honourable. The necessity to which I am referring is plainly nothing other than the unchangeability [immutabilitas] of God’s honour, which he possesses of himself, and from no one apart from himself. For this reason, ‘necessity’ is a misnomer. Let us say, nevertheless, that it is a necessity that the goodness of God should bring to completion what it has begun with respect to mankind, because of his unchangeability, although the whole of what he does is grace.175

175 Ibid.
This is all consonant with Anselm’s developed account of freedom. As we saw in the previous chapter, Anselm provides a way of thinking about freedom that is oriented towards its proper use, rather than the possibility of misuse: freedom is the capacity to preserve rectitude for its own sake. For creatures, Anselm insists, moral responsibility—praiseworthiness or blame—requires genuinely open options at some point, though freedom does not require this. Without this situation of genuinely open options (viz. to will justice or to will happiness), the creature’s right (or wrong) will would come entirely from God. The requirement of open options thus has to do with the creature’s overall ontological dependence on God; if God does not give the creature two potentially conflicting affections, from which the creature actually can choose one or the other to act upon in a non-determined way, then whatever the creature does follows simply and necessarily from God’s action. Given this relationship of dependence, the real possibility of misuse of freedom has to be open to the creature, and when it occurs, it must come from the creature, and not simply from the circumstance of causally determining desires, in order for it to merit praise or blame.

God, however, has no such dependence; God is what He is entirely through Himself. If God’s perfect Goodness determines that He will never sin, this is likewise a feature that comes entirely and exclusively from Himself. There is no need for God to be given options in order for the choice among options to come from God; the perfect Goodness which determines that God does the most fitting thing was not imposed on God by any external source, but comes entirely from His own being, and therefore the

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176 Again, for a helpful and detailed study (and defense) of Anselm’s account of freedom, see Rogers, *Anselm on Freedom*. 

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gratitude we owe is directly to Him and not to another, even though God does not face conflicting affections and therefore there was no real possibility of Him doing otherwise. All of this makes it plain enough that Anselm is concerned to insist on God’s freedom, and on the genuine gratuity of grace in salvation, just as Thomas is. Anselm’s approach to defending himself on these matters is, at points, quite similar to Thomas; like Thomas, he wants to preserve the rich intelligibility of God’s choice (as it were) to carry out this particular means of salvation rather than another, and rather than none at all. Like Thomas, he sees the value of identifying a variety of effects distinct to this particular means of saving for the purpose of grasping the fittingness of God’s action. And, like Thomas, he is careful to clarify the type of necessity he means to attribute to these acts, and in particular to deny that it is a necessity of compulsion. On the other hand, it appears that Anselm is willing to defend necessity in a sense that Thomas is not; the facts that not saving at all, and on top of that, not saving by satisfaction, would be less than maximally fitting, entail for Anselm that failing to do these things was not really open to God. Nonetheless, Anselm insists, He does them freely, and as a matter of grace and not obligation.

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177 See *CDH*, II.10, where Anselm develops this point explicitly: “The reason why angels are to be praised for their righteousness is not that they were in the past capable of sinning, but because in some way they possess—indeed, independently [*a se*]—an inability to sin; in this respect they somewhat resemble God, who possesses whatever he possesses independently. . . . God possesses to a perfect degree what he possesses independently, [therefore] he most of all is worthy to be praised for the good things which he possesses and keeps in his possession, doing this not out of any inevitable necessity, but as I have said earlier, out of an unchangeableness which is his peculiar property and lasts for ever. Thus the man we have in mind, who is also to be God, will be righteous independently and therefore worthy of praise, since he will possess independently every good thing which he will possess, not out of necessity but in freedom.”

Before we can begin to adjudicate this disagreement, we must consider another important and intimately related objection raised by Thomas against Anselm’s arguments for necessity, this one having to do with the requirements of justice. Even if Anselm were right about the unfittingness of mere forgiveness, it might be that Anselm has mischaracterized the relevant requirement as a matter of God’s justice, rather than, say, His supreme wisdom and goodness. Indeed, Anselm argues that, in the absence of satisfaction, to forgive sin rather than punish it is to tolerate that than which “there is nothing . . . more unjust to tolerate . . . in the universal order.” In such a scenario, Anselm concludes, God will have been unjust to Himself. God will have done less than was possible to bring about His own will. Thomas argues that, on the contrary, justice does not entail that God must require satisfaction or else punish. He considers the opposite position as an objection when he addresses the question whether other means of salvation were open to God; there, he insists that,

Even this justice depends upon the divine will which requires satisfaction for sin from the human race. For if God had wanted to free man from sin without any satisfaction at all, he would not have been acting against justice. Justice cannot be safeguarded by the judge whose duty is to punish crimes committed against others, . . . or the government, or the head of government, should he dismiss a crime without punishment. But God has no one above him, for he is himself the supreme and common good of the entire universe. If then he forgives sin, . . . he violates no one’s rights. The man who waives satisfaction and forgives an offence done to himself acts mercifully, and not unjustly.  

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179 Anselm, CDH, I.13.

180 ST IIIa q. 46 a. 2 ad. 3.
Anselm and Thomas agree in assigning God the position of the highest Good, and in saying that God is accountable to no external standard or authority. Yet Anselm infers from this that a sin against God must require either satisfaction or punishment, while Thomas infers that there is no authority which could impose such a necessity. For Anselm, God must require satisfaction out of justice to Himself; for Thomas, the fact that it is a matter of justice to Himself means it is open to His will to either require satisfaction or not.

There are at play in this disagreement two possible ways of interpreting the concept of satisfaction, which we have so far tended to conflate. On the one hand, we can think of satisfaction as a single discrete aspect of Christ’s atoning work: a moment in which something of sufficient value is offered to God to outweigh the debt produced by sin. On the other, we can think of satisfaction as the underlying rationale that ties together all of the actions which comprise the atonement: satisfaction as the rendering to God the very same which He justly demanded of humanity to begin with, to which is added a further gift to make up the fact of the initial failure. Thomas plainly treats satisfaction mainly in the former sense. In Anselm, there is admittedly a basis for this view as well: the whole schema of the infinite value of Christ’s life outweighing the debt of sin is suggestive of this, since it would seem to obviate the need for anything else to be done to set things right. One might think, then, that so long as Christ offers himself on behalf of humanity, all is well, regardless of whether anyone ever becomes united to Christ by receiving the benefit of his merits. The debt has been paid; whether sinners receive forgiveness or punishment is then a matter of indifference.
But there are compelling reasons to interpret Anselm in the latter sense. Recall that in specifying what has been “taken away” by sin and therefore needs to be restored in order to make satisfaction, Anselm says it is “whatever [God] planned to do with regard to the human species.” Here, Anselm shifts from the notion of an exchange of equivalent value to the conceptually prior one of rendering that which was always owed, and which was taken away. It makes sense that the former idea follows from the latter, i.e., that the ideal way of making satisfaction is to begin by repairing the precise damage that was done, restoring exactly what was taken away, and since in many cases this is not possible, we settle for an offering of similar value. But in the case of the atonement, Anselm actually presses the idea of restoring exactly what was taken away into service for the task of identifying exactly what Christ must accomplish. If satisfaction is merely the offering of sufficient value to remove a debt, one might think that the infinite value of Christ’s self-offering would obviate the need for humanity to give God anything else, but for Anselm, this is not so. Notice what follows from this:

Man, therefore, neither ought nor can receive from God what God planned to give him, unless man returns to God all that he has taken away from him. In this way, just as God incurred loss through man, similarly, through man’s agency, God would recover what he had lost. The only way in which this can be put into effect is as follows. Because of the man who was conquered, the whole of humanity is rotten and, as it were, in a ferment with sin—and God raises up no one with sin to fill up the complement of the renowned heavenly city. Correspondingly, suppose a man were victorious, because of him as many humans would be brought out of sin into a state of righteousness as would make up that full number . . . for the completion of which mankind was created.\(^{181}\)

This passage strongly suggests the satisfaction called for by human sin is not merely the removal of a debt which impeded forgiveness, setting the balance sheet clean.

\(^{181}\) Anselm, *CDH*, I.23.
It is, rather, a matter of bringing to fulfillment of God’s original intentions for humanity as a whole, over and against humanity’s sinful rejection of those intentions. Indeed, the whole point of satisfaction in *CDH* is not simply to pay a certain amount of value to God, but to provide for the fulfillment of what God originally called humanity to be, namely (a certain number of) rational souls participating in beatitude in harmonious community with the rest of the creatures God intended to be there. Christ offers himself to God, in a sense, so that he can also offer to God the Church, holy and blameless; until this latter takes place, that which was “taken away” has not been restored, and satisfaction has not been achieved.

On the broader view of satisfaction, then, we can see more clearly why God’s immutability would seem to Anselm to entail satisfaction over against mere forgiveness (and, likewise, why it would rule out the possibility of allowing humanity to be entirely condemned): God created humanity with intentions implicit in human nature; further, God justly intended to give humanity a specific task in the economy of his justice towards the devil and the other fallen angels. God’s immutability means that His intentions for humanity do not change. God foreknows sin and yet still intends the fulfillment of human nature. Satisfaction names God’s work in Christ to bring it about that humanity fulfills God’s intentions, both the intention implicit in human nature (that is, to know and love God for God’s sake), and the specific task of victory of the devil. It is important that Anselm tends to tie the divine will to justice quite tightly, in a nearly tautological way: since God willed this act of obedience from humanity, and God’s own will is that which above all ought to be fulfilled, God’s justice to Himself, which is also
to say the immutable consistency of His own will, means that He will provide for satisfaction, which is just to say, the fulfillment of His will in spite of humanity’s sin.

This broader interpretation of the concept of satisfaction has the salutary effect of unifying the diverse effects of Christ’s atoning work under single intelligible rationale. Far from reducing the importance of Christ’s defeat of the devil, his saving teaching and example, and so forth, it actually illuminates the importance of each of these effects while rendering them intelligible as a single, beautiful, supremely fitting act. If satisfaction is merely about the abstract value of Christ’s offering overcoming the abstract weight of sin, then establishing the necessity of satisfaction could indeed seem to crowd out the significance of other concepts; other effects would be interesting flourishes, perhaps, but the real reason for the Incarnation of Christ would have been simply to offer something of infinite value to God. But if satisfaction is not simply about fulfilling God’s concrete intentions for humanity, intentions which would go unfulfilled absent the Incarnation, then satisfaction does not actually crowd out the significance of the other effects of Christ’s work. On the contrary, it draws them all together.

Indeed, all of the beautiful and fitting effects of Christ’s work must ultimately be seen as bound up with the infinite value of his self-offering, just as the infinite weight of sin is bound up with supreme goodness of the concrete will of the God whose will sin rejects. God cannot be the one against whom a sin carries infinite weight unless He is one whose acts towards His creatures would display an infinite goodness and wisdom.

Beatitudes are a profound good. To receive beatitude as a fitting reward for obedience is a profound good. The heavenly community God intends is a profound good. These things are good intrinsically, and that is why God would will them, but, moreover, they are gain
an infinite value (such that one should not turn aside from acting towards them no matter what other good could be accomplished thereby) because among whatever good possibilities there could be for God, these are the things He actually willed for us. Sin has infinite weight in that it threatens to prevent these things. Likewise, Christ cannot be an infinitely valuable offering to God except if he is such a one whose every act and effect would display (to the eye of faith) the infinite goodness and wisdom of God. Christ’s life is supremely valuable because Christ is God, the Word. But because of this identity, it follows that Christ would do the sorts of good, beautiful, and fitting things that he did to fulfill God’s intentions for humanity, such as resist the devil and provide a saving teaching and example. Christ’s life is infinitely valuable, this is to say, because of the same, self-consistent, infinite goodness that suffuses everything about him, and everything he accomplished.

If we recognize this relationship between Anselm’s seemingly abstract valuation of sin and of Christ’s self-offering as infinite (though not to say equal), on the one hand, and, on the other, the infinite goodness and wisdom of the concrete ends God intended (which sin “takes away” and satisfaction restores), then the relationship between satisfaction and other atonement concepts comes more clearly into view as something like that of a whole to its constituent parts. We cannot finally separate the infinite value of Christ’s life from the things which Christ does with his life, nor the infinite value of God’s commands from the goodness at which those commands are necessarily aimed. Likewise, we cannot finally separate the satisfactory value of Christ’s self-offering from the diverse array of effects it brought together towards the accomplishment of God’s purposes for creation. Christ defeats the devil in order to satisfy God’s intentions; Christ
provides a teaching and saving example for human beings in order to satisfy God’s intentions; and so forth. Understood this way, satisfaction does not obviate the need for the theologian to attend to the diverse array of fitting effects accomplished by Christ’s work. On the contrary, a satisfaction account is inherently amenable to continuous addition; as Anselm suggested himself, there is no need to suppose that the full depth and richness of Christ’s satisfying offering to God will ever be fully plumbed by human minds. In this life, we hope and believe that through God’s guidance the Church will search out ever more deeply the ways in which Christ’s work brings about God’s intentions for and in us in spite of sin—which is to say, the ways in which Christ makes satisfaction.

An Epistemic Qualification on the Question of Necessity

It is important to notice at this point that the broad view of satisfaction can be true whether or not Anselm is ultimately correct on the questions of necessity and justice. I have tried to give Anselm a fair hearing on these issues, because doing so allows us to see important features of the meaning of satisfaction more clearly. This is the account of satisfaction I mean to defend; nonetheless, I suggest that we can hold to it in conjunction with a different view of divine freedom and justice. To see how, we can start with an important epistemic qualification to make in light of Thomas even if Anselm is substantially correct about necessity and about God’s justice to Himself. Let us grant for the moment that Anselm is right about the following: (1) necessarily, God does what is most fitting, and, (2) given the conjunction of God’s intentions for humanity and human sin, satisfaction by the Incarnate Word is the most fitting means of salvation, and, therefore, (3) necessarily, God freely brings about salvation by satisfaction. Even if this is
so, it may be that Thomas’s epistemic procedure is more sound. That is, it may be that Anselm overestimates the possibility that human reason can know (2) with sufficient confidence absent divine revelation. Perhaps, that is, we simply cannot know the range of possibilities open to divine power and compatible with the divine nature, including the range of possible intentions God could have had for humanity, and thus cannot say with certainty whether there is one most fitting course of action for God viz. sinful humanity or many maximally fitting possibilities. Likewise, perhaps we cannot know for certain that every maximally fitting possibility includes satisfaction; perhaps God could have fittingly arranged the fulfillment of some different set of maximally fitting intentions in some other way than having them be fulfilled by the Incarnate Word. In that case, even if (1)-(3) are all actually true, it would still be the case that we could not know (2) and (3) to be true, even given that God carried out salvation this way. Perhaps, we might say, satisfaction was metaphysically necessary as a matter of God’s justice to Himself given creation and the facts of angelic and human sin, and grant Anselm’s arguments that this would not militate against divine freedom, but humanity cannot know it to be so, even after the fact.

With this qualification in mind, we can see why Thomas’s is perhaps a better as a normative example of theological method viz. the doctrine of atonement. Since proving it strictly necessary depends on too great a level of knowledge about the possibilities open to the divine nature, when it comes to the doctrine of atonement, theologians attempting to think with and in service to the Church generally ought to plumb the tradition for an array of concepts which illuminate a diversity of effects that flow from the particular means by which God has elected to save. The most natural way to do this is to consider
various elements from the tradition in turn, and then work out how to understand and affirm each as much as possible in explicit and direct conversation with scripture and tradition. Thomas’s method does indeed allow him to display the diversity of effects of Christ’s Passion (which Anselm in fact affirms and underscores in his own way182) in a more readily accessible way than Anselm does.

This recommendation probably should not be pushed too hard; Anselm’s method also has distinctive virtues as a speculative exercise. Asking why this means of atonement is necessary rather than merely recognizable as fitting after the fact puts Anselm in a position to probe the ratio of the Incarnation in a unique way, a way he could not do as readily if he did not attempt to find some hinge of necessity. I should also be said that Anselm was plainly responding to questions that arose in conversations within his own community; theologians arguably should not neglect questions posed from the perspective of nonbelief just because their preferred method is not convenient for doing so (though on this front, Thomas likewise considers objections that come from a perspective of unbelief). Indeed, in the very fecundity of his work, Anselm shows us how the more directly apologetic practice of arguing without assuming all of the premises which might be available within the faith can produce distinctive intellectual goods for the faithful, over and above any persuasive value it may happen to have for non-believers. But by and large, perhaps, what is needed more regularly is the careful and systematic attention Thomas exemplifies to the diverse array of concepts and modes of

182 Recall that in his Commendation of the text of CDH to Pope Urban, Anselm insists that he is adding to what the Fathers unfolded about the fittingness of the Incarnation, and that “the logic of the truth is so copious and profound that it cannot be exhausted by mere mortals.” And likewise, as we noted in Chapter 3, Anselm includes victory of the devil, and moral example within his account. Though these mentions are brief, they are easily expanded upon in a more systematic context.
reflecting on the work of God in Christ handed down in the tradition, in such a way as to show as much as possible of its profound and multifaceted fittingness.

So what shall we say about the question of necessity? When we understand the dispute, such as it is, there appear to be dangers on both sides. Thomas’s approach can tend to drain any real force out of the points of fittingness he identifies: if it truly is more fitting to do X rather than Y under circumstances C, but still it could be equally open to God to do Y under circumstances C, then fittingness does not seem to amount to much. Anselm’s approach, on the other hand, risks overestimating the human capacity to rightly discern and evaluate what might or might not be open to the divine will: perhaps, even though X is more fitting than Y under circumstances C, Y could be carried out with equal fittingness under circumstances D. Perhaps a principled agnosticism about the set of circumstances in principle open to God can allow us to avoid both dangers on both sides. Let us grant with Anselm that God cannot do what is unfitting, and infer from that what he does: if in fact we could know that, given circumstances C, X is the most fitting option, then this is as much as knowing that under circumstances C, X is what God freely would do, and if this is true of salvation by the satisfying offering of a God-man, then it follows necessarily that this is what God will freely and graciously do. But let us attach the epistemic qualification that God’s power and wisdom are such that we cannot properly evaluate the range of options that could be open to Him so as to evaluate the relative fittingness of each.183

183 There is some justification for this sort of caution in Anselm’s thought. In his treatment of the fall of the devil, Anselm suggests that, before their fall, the angels reasoned that God would have to forgive them: “the angel was certain that the number that were created to enjoy God had been established with so much wisdom as to have nothing superfluous and to be unable to be lessened without leaving something incomplete, and that God’s wonderful work could not remain partially incomplete . . . he could in no way know . . . that God would put human nature in place of the angelic and the angelic in the place of the
If this is correct, we can thus conclude, going some distance with Thomas, that we are not ever in an epistemic position to safely conclude that we have arrived at necessity when it comes to God’s actions. This allows us to say that, to whatever degree we discern that it really is the case that saving by satisfaction is, in an absolute sense, more fitting than saving without it, we really are discerning why God would save by satisfaction and would not save without it, even if, at the end of the day, we confess that our finitude means that we cannot confidently assert necessity, since we do not know whether another means of salvation could have been equally fitting, equally expressive of the divine wisdom and goodness. We can even leave room here for comparisons within a narrowed space of possibilities. For instance, we might reasonably ask whether, holding all else about God’s actual work in the world equal, it was more fitting or less fitting that Christ save by making a satisfactory offering to God rather than without such an offering (for instance, if Christ simply taught rather suffered the Passion). If we judge positively, then we have a very narrow and relative sense of necessity. This idea provides an interpretation that allows many of Thomas’s arguments from fittingness to carry some weight and provide a real intelligibility to God’s actions even if they do not show necessity of the type Anselm thought he had achieved; if in this narrow sort of comparison, God’s mercy would be displayed less without satisfaction, then we have a good reason for why God saved by satisfaction rather than not given all the other facts about the world and God’s chosen means of salvation, without being able to conclude

human should he fall.” Anselm, De Casu Diaboli, 23. Now, if the angels could not foresee what options were open to God and accurately assess them, and thus inferred that of necessity, then human minds certainly have reason to withhold conclusions of necessity from their own speculations about what God could have done.

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that God’s mercy could not have been displayed equally well in a radically different order that nonetheless did not include satisfaction.\footnote{Indeed, this interpretation fits well with the way Thomas uses the distinction between God’s absolute and ordained power, as noted in Courtenay, “The Dialectic of Omnipotence in the High and Late Middle Ages,” 250.}

III. Aesthetic and Literary Fittingness in the Doctrine of Atonement

One of the aspects of pre-modern atonement theology that is almost never included in contemporary atonement theology is displayed by the way Thomas’s arguments for the fittingness of the Passion extend to various features of the Passion, such as the location, the time, the fact that Christ suffered, and the fact that he was executed next to criminals. He considers objections having to do with the way in which these features seem not to cohere with Old Testament prefiguring: if Christ’s passion is prefigured by Old Testament sacrifice, why is he tortured on a cross rather than simply killed and burned? Why is Christ not killed precisely at the time when the Passover lamb would be sacrificed? And why does he die outside of Jerusalem rather than in the Temple? Why is it fitting that Gentiles have a hand in killing Christ? It is at this point and in the same manner that Aquinas considers various objections to the moral fittingness of the Passion as a means to salvation, such as why it is appropriate that Christ should an act of violence should be a part of bringing about salvation.

Thomas often answers these objections by highlighting some pedagogical, soteriological benefit to each particular feature of the passion. Christ’s suffering on the Cross teaches and inspires us not to fear a painful death. He dies in Jerusalem because Jerusalem is God’s ordained place for sacrifices, while he dies outside of the Temple to better communicate that his death is efficacious for the Gentiles and not just for the Jews.
He dies in a violent and visible way rather than dying of natural causes or due to sickness so that no one would have reason to think that death was natural and proper to Christ, and so that no one would have reason to doubt that he really did die before being resurrected. Christ dies with his body remaining whole so as to avoid giving a justification to those who would divide the Body of Christ.

There is another, overlapping class of explanations of fittingness that are not quite pedagogical or soteriological in this fashion. Instead, in these cases Thomas identifies something much more like an aesthetic, even literary connection, typically between God’s actions in the Old Testament and the Passion in support of the fittingness of the passion. For example, Christ’s death on a tree is fitting because Adam and Eve fell by taking fruit from a tree. Christ dies lifted up to show that he sanctifies the air and opens the way for our ascent to heaven. Drawing on Augustine, Thomas asserts that the physical shape of the cross which Christ occupied signifies the breadth, and height, and length, and depth of the love of God. Indeed, providence is seen to lie behind the great variety of resonances with Old Testament symbols that the cross allows:

Seventh, this kind of death corresponds to many figures. As Augustine says, a wooden ark saved the human race from perishing in the Flood. When God’s people were leaving Egypt, Moses divided the sea with his wooden rod, forced Pharaoh to yield, and saved the people of God. The same Moses cast a piece of wood into the water, changing its bitterness to sweet, and by his wooden rod caused a salutary spring to issue from the spiritual rock. To overcome Amalec, Moses stretched forth hands clasping his wooden rod. God’s law was consigned to the Ark of the Covenant, which was of wood. Thus, as by so many steps, we come to the wood of the Cross.185

185 Ibid., IIIa q. 46 a. 4, corpus.
This sort of typological connection is by no means unique to Aquinas, but it is helpful to consider them in the context of the doctrine of atonement, and what the task of the theologian is when it comes to this doctrine. In this, Thomas provides a helpful corrective to the impression we might get from emulating Anselm alone. While Anselm does mention these kinds of explanation of fittingness (and indeed he does not actually reject them), he moves on from them as a matter of methodology in order to uncover a rationality that is responsive to a deeper kind of doubt, the doubt of one who does not already accept the testimony of scripture. Even though this is a feature that follows from Anselm’s rhetorical purpose in *CDH* (that is, to answer questions from the perspective of unbelievers, rather than to unpack the meaning of Christ’s work systematically and comprehensively) rather than from any substantive theological commitment on his part, Anselm’s more provocative proposals seem to have had the effect (in the long run, at least) of crowding out space for this sort of reflection in the domain of atonement theology. Such a shift does not actually follow from Anselm’s method; Thomas shows beautifully how discernments of aesthetic fittingness in what we might call God’s authorial Providence can fit next to detailed analysis of how and why Christ’s offering satisfies for sin, how and why he overcame the devil, and so on. The theologian serving the Church has the task, when it comes to the atoning work of Christ, of meditating deeply on every aspect of it in order to discern God’s character in those acts. This includes beauty just as surely as it does justice, truth, and mercy.

Contemporary approaches to atonement tend to focus on questions around issues such as the mechanism and meaning of atonement according to various models; on moral issues related to justice, the transferability of guilt, the possibility of redemptive violence
or innocent suffering; the appropriateness of this or that theory for this or that cultural context; whether this or that model is supportive of oppression or resistance to oppression; on the biblical and historical antecedents for this or that model; on the correct interpretation and placement of this or that author with this or that ‘type’ of atonement theory. Although these questions are not raised with the same formally apologetic concern as Anselm’s, it is notable that none of these questions are really answered by the kinds of appeals to pedagogical or aesthetic appropriateness relative to the particular historical and physical circumstances of Christ’s Passion, just as Anselm’s question of necessity was not answered by them. That Thomas (or Anselm) might suggest that the fittingness of Christ dying by being lifted up on a piece of wood because Adam and Eve sinned by taking a fruit from a tree, and because Noah and his family were saved on a wooden boat, does not appear to fit anywhere into contemporary atonement debates.

The fact that this particular explanatory and justificatory strategy with respect to certain divine actions seems to be treated more like an artifact of antiquity than a serious form of argument is worthy of careful consideration. It might be explained any number of ways. Perhaps it has to do with the sense that explaining resonances of this sort within scripture, or indeed within history itself, in terms of divine authorship is not a legitimate historical or exegetical move. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that, as we have observed, other issues have dominated the attentions of academic theologians. In any case, the trend itself is an unfortunate one. In the case of Christians who do affirm a strong doctrine of divine providence (of the sort that seems to follow from classical Christian claims about the nature of God), it is hard to see why they should not use such a doctrine as a premise

186 Anselm, CDH I.3.
when they interpret scripture or the events of history; there is nothing unreasonable in this, even if, naturally, the conclusions they draw from such a premise will not be immediately compelling to people who deny it. This sort of interpretation is still worth doing, if for no other reason than that it can contribute to the understanding of those who do accept the relevant premise. If we operate, that is to say, with a strong doctrine of divine providence, and we recognize that such a doctrine may constitute a genuinely rational presupposition in our approach to history or to the texts of scripture, then we have good reason to think of God as an Author. To put it another way, if we have crossed the threshold of divine revelation, we may then look back at God’s actions revealed in scripture and in history and discover a whole new range of explanations and justifications has become available to us. Now that we have accepted the reality of an Author and have come to understand something about his character, we are in a position to consider all of reality to be in principle open to explanation with reference to the revelatory intentions and creative capacities of that Author.

Given the trend of neglecting this kind of reflection, we ought to consider what it might add to our understanding, and what is lost if we leave it out. Arguably, it is a benefit to the understanding of the faithful to unfold the wisdom and beauty of what God has done, both in the events of Christ’s Passion, and in the way it is recorded in scripture, in every possible way. Arguably, this strategy, which views events in salvation history and in the text of scripture as potentially intelligible in the same way as decisions made

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187 This is to borrow a phrase and a concept from William Abraham, who develops the idea of entering into the Christian faith as crossing a threshold of a house; once one has entered, one can see all kinds of things that were invisible from the outside. Likewise, from within the faith, there are kinds of evidence and reasons for the truth of the Gospel which cannot be accessed except from within it. William J. Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).
by an author or creator in producing such objects as stories, poems, songs, and other works of art. With respect to the agency of an author, explanations in terms of fittingness, beauty, foreshadowing, prefiguring, resonance, repetition, symbolism, pedagogical or revelatory efficacy, and so forth, are naturally taken to explain the significance of a particular authorial choice, and thus the meaning of a particular feature of the work in question.

Discerning this kind of literary beauty is, therefore, one way we recognize intentionality and wisdom behind a story, and identifying connections across a text is likewise a way of coming to understand the text to have a genuine unity. Making these connections visible with all the exegetical and analytical skill theologians can bring to bear, then, is an important and valid task if they want to recognize and understand God as the Author, both of salvation history and of the scriptures which relay that history to us—and the latter not necessarily in the sense of dictation to the human authors, but certainly in providentially guiding them, perhaps so as to leave signs beyond what the human authors could have intended. Such signs can serve both to teach us, concretizing and reinforcing truths we may know from elsewhere in an abstract way, and to elicit our sheer joy at recognizing them. Recovering this mode of reflection within the doctrine of atonement, then, can serve to increase our understanding of the events that constitute our salvation, and thereby deepen our love and admiration for the one who is their Author.
IV. Satisfaction, Holiness, and Friendship

There is one further theme to explore in the vein of Thomas’s elaboration of Anselmian satisfaction, and that is Thomas’s emphasis on the concept of friendship.188 Aquinas provides a distinct advance on Anselm’s account in the way he shows the end of satisfaction to be the renewal of friendship. The theme of friendship as a kind of concord of wills (along with that of friendship with God as the proper end of humanity) is a rich one in Thomas’s thought, and it provides an important context within which to understand the role of satisfaction in leading to the proper end of human life, rather than functioning as an arbitrary legal prerequisite for the achievement of that end. To be sure, we have already leveraged aspects of Anselm’s thought towards this point, especially in unpacking the proper honor of God for Anselm as love of God for His own sake, as well as Anselm’s identification of the connection that enables sinners to benefit from Christ’s satisfaction as one of familial love. Thomas, however, provides a greater level of clarity about what kind of unity of wills is involved in our proper honoring of God, how this unity makes for friendship, and how satisfaction restores friendship when it is broken by injustice. In the remainder of this chapter, we shall briefly introduce Thomas’s concept of friendship, and then move to the question of friendship with God, and satisfaction as aimed at the repair of that friendship. We will interpret Thomas’s account of merit, grace, and satisfaction viz. Christ’s Passion in light of this vision of friendship with God. This will show how satisfaction can be integrated naturally into an account of the Christian

188 For the analysis that follows, I am indebted to Daniel Schwartz’s very helpful study on this topic, which organizes various disparate pieces of Aquinas’s thought which touch on the concept of friendship into a coherent account. See, Daniel Schwartz, Aquinas on Friendship (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
life, membership in the Church, and growth in holiness through repentance and
participation in the sacraments. In Chapter 5, when we consider some critiques of
satisfaction accounts of atonement that have to do with its implications about
relationships between human beings, we will return again to the human side of Thomas’s
account of friendship in order to see what our satisfaction account actually entails in the
sphere of injustices between human persons.

The capacities of knowing and willing make human beings capable of friendship,
which Aquinas (following Aristotle) identifies as a certain kind of concord of wills. It
constitutes a kind of unity between persons, and, in particular, a unity based on the
orientation of the will towards ends (rather than unity of opinion). It is because we can
grasp ends, find them worthy of love, and direct our actions towards them, that we can
form friendships. In a friend, one recognizes another who loves what one loves, and
therefore comes to love the friend for the goodness of her will. One thus desires to imitate
the will of one’s friend, and likewise wills that she receive those things which constitute
her genuine good. Friends may sometimes differ in their judgment of what means will
best materialize the ends they share, but they will share at least a concord in willing the
end. Moreover, when there are multiple acceptable means that might actualize the shared
end, the love of friendship provides a motive to choose the same means as one’s friend
whenever possible, and in this way it moves friends towards union of wills; friendship
motivates cooperation.¹⁸⁹ Friendship is thus the sort of shared habit of will that enables

¹⁸⁹ This the route Schwartz suggests for interpreting what Aquinas means by saying friendship is a union of
wills rather than opinions; it provides a motive for acting the same when the reason permits but does not
necessitate such action, without either resolving or being destroyed the deeper sort of difference of opinion
involved when one holds that one’s friend’s chosen means is not an appropriate means to the shared end.
See Ibid., 22–41.
and supports participation in common projects, and a common life. This common life makes us each better able to work towards our ends, to live virtuous lives, both because friends are beneficent towards one another, and because friends delight in, encourage, and join in each other’s virtuous activity. In this way, through a shared will, “friends are united to ourselves in such a way that their actions are, in some ways, also ours.”¹⁹⁰ This point will be important for thinking about how it can be possible for a person to make satisfaction on behalf of a friend.

With this picture of friendship in mind, we can turn towards the question of friendship with God. For Aquinas, friendship names the relationship towards God that constitutes the proper end of human beings:

> [F]riendship provides, for Aquinas, the paradigm through which the theological virtue of charity can be best conceptualized. Friendship captures the many disparate elements that different authoritative sources, both biblical and patristic, assign to charity. Charity is a friendship involving love towards God and all rational beings capable of loving Him.¹⁹¹

Now, given the radical ontological difference between creaturely wills and the divine will presents some difficulties for applying the concept of friendship neatly to the relationship between human beings and God. Human beings can never will what God does in the way that God wills it, since our understanding of the connection between any given material good and the end for which God wills it (namely His own goodness) is vastly inferior to God’s. God certainly seems to will things we cannot understand as connected to the Good at all. On Schwartz’s reading, however, Aquinas’s view is that friendship with God

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 5.
means willing the things God wills just to the extent that we do grasp the connection between those things and the Good; this is always a rather limited extent, but it is more than nothing. On this reading, Aquinas even allows that in the cases where we cannot understand what God wills as aimed at the Good, friendship with God does not require us to will what He does—it simply requires that we be subject to His will in spite of our not being able to will with Him. We can only actually will with Him materially in the manner that constitutes friendship in the case that the thing God wills impresses our own rational will as good, as connected to the end for which God wills it. In these case, we are invited beyond servanthood (in which we merely recognize God’s authority) into friendship (in which we actually, however partially, grasp the connection between what God wills and the end for which He wills it, and thus will it alongside Him). In friendship with God, we come to love God for God’s sake, as our will is directed through God’s means towards God’s end, namely His own Goodness. Friendship thus specifies a state in which our hearts and minds are drawn ever more deeply into concord with God, which is possible through God’s gracious sharing of His own wisdom and love with us. It follows naturally that, in addition to specifying the sort of relation to God that beatitude involves for human beings, friendship also characterizes the unity of the Church. Those who are friends with God are also, therefore, friends with one another, sharing a concord of wills leading to habitual shared action towards an end—the highest and most ultimate end there is for human beings. The members of Christ’s Church, that is, share God as the

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192 Or, perhaps more precisely, it is the divine essence considered as goodness; God’s Goodness does not, after all, specify a real distinction within God, but rather a conceptual one in our talk about God.
formal end of their wills, and the Church’s sacraments and teachings as the means to materialize that end; the bond that makes the Church one is thus a bond of friendship.

This account of friendship can illuminate the appropriateness of the satisfaction offered by Christ as a means of bringing sinful human persons into friendship with God, and in at least two ways: one has to do with the way satisfaction is appropriate as a means to restore friendship (or perhaps establish it in the first place), and the other has to do with the way satisfaction is something a friend can help us to perform, or even perform in our stead. First, then, we can note that the same capacities which make us capable of friendship make satisfaction a fitting way of setting things right between friends when the relationship has been damaged by injustice committed by one party. An unjust act against one’s friend signals and acts upon this break in the concord that is necessary for friendship. In Thomas’ terms, it produces an inequality that is contrary to friendship. Since friendship is a concord of wills, it follows that the inequality created by unjust acts properly speaking (that is, unjust acts done willingly) involves at root an inequality of wills, a disparity between what the honor and dignity of the wronged person calls for and what the wrongdoer actually wills and does. Satisfaction is the means to repair this disparity and the restoration of friendship, since it directs will and act back into alignment with the good of the one wronged.

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193 See *ST*, Supplementum, q. 12 a. 2, ad. 1.

194 On the other hand, one could act unjustly out of an error in judgment, so that the wrongdoer does not will an unjust end, but simply makes a mistaken judgment about what justice requires; one could inflict harm that is materially unjust unintentionally. In this case, it would seem, the wrongdoer will want to make things right—to make satisfaction—as soon as the injustice is understood, precisely because of the concord in wills which should direct his action.
Some might argue that recourse to satisfaction is not appropriate between friends; friends should simply forgive. As Schwartz notes, however, Thomas rejects this view and defends recourse to justice between friends as at times permissible or even obligatory. This was an important practical question for conflicts Aquinas faced in his own day, when he would have understood most people in his society to be joined by charity insofar as they were members of the Church, but nonetheless there were important and difficult conflicts, some of which involved injustice. When secular masters at the universities sought to remove the rights and privileges of Mendicants, they also advanced the argument that Mendicants should not turn to authorities to have their rights and privileges protected; the Mendicants should rather preserve peace by accepting even unjust forms of harm to themselves. Thomas’s response was to argue that under certain conditions it is licit to pursue justice even against a friend.\textsuperscript{195} When the injustice in question threatens the good of the community, Thomas insists that pursuing justice can even be an obligation of love rather than merely permitted. While it is true, Thomas concedes, that one ought to be willing to accept personal inconvenience to maintain genuine peace, the peace that is upheld by ignoring serious injustice is actually a false peace, and not worthy of being upheld.\textsuperscript{196} Likewise, we might speculate, an injustice can be a rupture in the concord of wills that makes a friendship, so that ignoring it cannot really preserve the friendship anyway. Friendship here has to be based on something substantial, and it can be damaged or even undone. Satisfaction can mend such damage, since it represents a movement of

\textsuperscript{195} Schwartz, Aquinas on Friendship, 130, “Aquinas’s Commentary [on 1 Corinthians] mentions four such conditions: (i) the motivation of the suitors should not be avarice or greed, (ii) the trial must not generate an atmosphere of contentiousness detrimental to public peace, (iii) procedural justice must be kept, (iv) scandal . . . is to be avoided.”

\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 131–32.
the wills back into concord. On the other hand, for Aquinas it seems that friends can differ in opinion about what justice requires to the degree that one opposes the other in court without losing the unity of wills that constitutes friendship; they both will to do what is just toward the other, but simply cannot agree about what justice entails. In such cases pursuing a judgment from a higher authority (perhaps enjoining an act of satisfaction on one party) might take place within a friendship, rather than being needed in order to restore it. In this case, it might be better to say that satisfaction preserves friendship rather than restores it, but friendship remains its end.

Lest we think that satisfaction between friends is overly exacting and unmerciful, we should note that for Aquinas, satisfaction between friends is actually more about union of wills than quantitative equality with the harm done. Sometimes it is impossible to set right exactly what was broken or provide something of equivalent value; on Aquinas’s analysis, satisfaction between friends requires only that one do what one can. While this may seem at odds with Anselm’s more rigid insistence on equivalence, there is some space for Anselm to accommodate this possibility. Anselm says, after all, that satisfaction requires the offender to offer something that is of the appropriate value in the eyes of the one wronged. It may be that in many cases, in light of a history of...

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197 Ibid., 31–34. Schwartz notes that in his commentary on the Sentences Thomas considers the example of the dispute between angels described in Daniel as a case of disagreement and opposition between parties who nonetheless remain in the friendship of charity. The angels differ in judgment about what God will do with respect to Israel, and act in opposition to one another based on their differing judgments. Nonetheless, they maintain a common end in that they will to submit to whatever God actually reveals His will to be. Thus, Aquinas argues, the fact that can only have a finite knowledge of God’s will in this life results, sometimes, in genuine opposition between those who remain within the friendship of charity.

198 Ibid., 152. See, St. Thomas, IV Sent., d. 15, q. 1, a. 2c.
friendship, one can value a sincere apology expressive of a real desire to set things right as of sufficient value to achieve satisfaction.

In any case, we can see that recourse to satisfaction need not be motivated by a lack of mercy, or a vindictive desire to mete out punishment, or self-interest; the pursuit of justice against a friend may perhaps be motivated by a genuine concern for the good of the friend, which includes that he be just. Or, it may be motivated by the specific end which one has in common with the friend, while differing about the means to it. Such cases need not entail a failure to value the friendship enough, but rather a recognition that there is a sense in which friendship really does need to be merited by a genuine concord of wills, and when this is gone, forbearance would simply hide the truth, or constitute a failure to will an end shared in common firmly enough. If two friends share a common project, but the actions of one of them threaten to endanger that project (however unintentionally), then surely the erring friend would want the other to use whatever legitimate means are available to end his errant actions, and bring him back into proper alignment with their shared end. If friendship is oriented towards a common end, then it is no friendly act to value the friendship itself more highly than the end towards which both friends are working, and towards which their love is more fundamentally directed.

Turning towards the repair of a break in friendship with God, we can recall, as we have observed already, the most fundamental level at which sin causes a break between the sinner and God is in the will; to sin is to will in a way that one ought not to will, in short, to violate the concord of wills that is required for friendship with God. To restore the will to friendship with God, we need a means that appropriately embodies the right kind of movement in the will, and the mind as well insofar as it also needs to be moved.
In connection with the requirement of satisfaction towards God, Schwartz captures this dynamic nicely:

Aquinas’s theory of satisfaction is explained by a theology that considers God not to be a self-concerned being, but one who aims to bring His creatures, and especially rational creatures, into a particular bond with Him—one that is or resembles friendship. God is not content simply to be redressed for the injustices committed against Him. His aims look beyond redress to the establishment of a relationship. Rational beings have to make themselves deserving partners of such friendship through the reformation of their attitudes and habits and the performance of certain acts. Conformity with the demands of corrective justice as effected by satisfaction brings about some of these changes.¹⁹⁹

Charity is thus required for an act to count as satisfactory with respect to God, since charity is the kind of conformity between human will and divine will that makes it possible for a person to be friends with God. It seems natural, then, that satisfaction would play a role in preventing future wrongs, in addition to repairing a wrong done in the past, since it is an act of the sort that comes from the habit of the will that is in the opposite direction of sin. Though the habit of charity is infused rather than acquired, the appropriate exercise of the habit plays a role in strengthening it, disposing one to receive further grace.²⁰⁰ Although, as we saw in Chapter 2 and 3, critics of satisfaction accounts of atonement tend to think that it has nothing to do with future holiness or proper relationship to God, Thomas’s way of thinking about friendship shows that the connection is quite natural: satisfying for sin is an exercise of the habit of will that makes for friendship with God, and, specifically, an exercise of will aimed at repairing the

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¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 161.

²⁰⁰ See, e.g., ST IIIa q. 24 a. 6, corpus.
wrong, which helps one both to learn the true nature and extent of the wrong and to strengthen one’s will against committing further wrongs.

We find these features of satisfaction and the role it plays in bringing about friendship between sinners and God on display when Thomas lists the ways in which the Passion is fitting means towards the salvation of human persons:

Now because man was set free through Christ’s passion, many things having to do with man’s salvation over and above liberation from sin also converged . . . First, man could thus see how much God loves him, and so would be aroused to love him . . . Second, he gave us an example of obedience, humility, constancy, justice, and of other virtues which his passion revealed and which are necessary for man’s salvation. . . . Third, by his passion, Christ not only freed man from sin, but merited for him the grace of justification, and the glory of beatitude . . . Fourth, man thus feels a greater obligation to refrain from sin . . . Fifth, in this way a greater dignity accrues to man. Man had been overcome and deceived by the devil. But it is a man who overcomes the devil. Man has merited death; a man by dying would conquer death.201

Thomas understands Christ’s passion to merit grace insofar as it is an act of virtue performed by a person in a state of grace. The grace merited by Christ then overflows to the members of Christ’s body, who are united with him through charity, which means friendship with God. Eleonore Stump unpacks the logic of this process nicely:

The source of Christ’s merit that provides grace for humans is his will. For someone to merit something is for him to bring it about that some good thing should in justice be given him. In the last analysis, however, good things for humans are those which contribute to obtaining eternal life. Now an action meriting eternal life must be an action done out of charity. And in fact charity is the root of all merit because it is the love of God, who is goodness personified, and the love of other persons and things for the sake of goodness. . . . But Christ in his passion suffered out of the deepest charity, for he voluntarily accepted great suffering and death out of love for all humans. . . . So because of the intensity of his love for

201 ST, IIIa q. 46 a. 3, corpus.
human beings Christ merits grace leading to eternal life; and as the head of all humans (at least potentially), he merits this grace for all people. 202

The grace bestowed in virtue of Christ’s merit is the internal habit which enables and inclines a person to love God for God’s own sake; it is the infused virtue of charity, which makes one a friend of God. It is essential for Thomas that this grace does not override human freedom. It is rather that the will cooperates with and is empowered by grace. Though there are many puzzles here around the relationship between grace and freedom, the key point for our purposes is that we can see the way a satisfaction account of atonement can very organically connect with a detailed vision of the Christian life. For Aquinas, it leads to and continually supports gradual growth into perfect union with Christ through a consistent life of faith and especially through participation in the sacraments. 203 Through this process, the merit of Christ’s satisfying work on the Cross is active over and over as the soul receives grace through the sacraments, is empowered to grow in charity, to repent of sins, and ultimately to become holy, to be a saint in the fullest sense. This makes it clearer than is apparent in CDH, perhaps, that satisfaction is an event that changes the recipient, drawing them ever more deeply into friendship to God. Thomas thus unpacks the way that the need (such as it is) for satisfaction comes from the particular predicament of the sinner, who needs to make satisfaction, rather than from anything in God (except, perhaps, His wisdom and goodness towards us) requiring Him to demand it.


203 Anselm, of course, assigns a similar role to the sacraments. For a helpful study of the role the sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation play in enabling the believer to appropriate Christ’s satisfaction, see Williams, “The Sacramental Presuppositions of Anselm’s ‘Cur Deus Homo.’” See especially 264-5.
What Anselm suggests quite briefly as a supplementary argument is thus drawn out more explicitly in Aquinas: it is appropriate to penitents to desire to set right what was broken. Sin is a problem not just of wrong action but of a will that is not appropriately aligned with God’s, a will that does not love God properly, or love the things that God loves. Making satisfaction is a part of bringing the will back into alignment. As Stump observes, “On Aquinas’ view, the will moves away from sin by moving in a direction opposed to those movements which inclined it to sin. Doing so requires being sorry for past sin in such a way that the past sin comes to be against one’s present will.”

As Aquinas suggests, and as we have already noted, an act of satisfaction can also teach a wrongdoer the truth about the wrongdoing by showing them what it is they ought to will. This makes sense in the case of an act assigned to the wrongdoer, but also in the case that the act is carried by someone else. In the latter case, the will of the wrongdoer is drawn first of all to love the satisfier, but thereby to love what the satisfier loves, namely what is just, including the full and proper dignity of the one who was wronged. When sinners fail to realize the full gravity of their sin, or how they truly ought to love God, the Cross teaches them the truth, enacting both how much God loves them, and what true faithfulness looks like. Sinners can learn by meditating on the Cross how far they ought to go in resisting sin. Our loyalty and gratitude to Christ is loyalty and gratitude to God, both because Christ is God, and because Christ’s human will, which we love in loving him, loves God. In friendship to Christ, we are drawn to imitate his will. Over time, by grace we may align our wills more and more fully with Christ’s self-offering, and thereby

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204 Stump, “Atonement According to Aquinas,” 271.
come to offer to God the honor we have always owed to Him. We can see in all of this that satisfaction itself is a pedagogical tool. When God is the one who assigns it and carries it out, it is indeed a saving and atoning form of teaching.

This all puts us in a position to see a second point: friendship renders intelligible the way that one can make satisfaction for one’s friend, and thus also the way that Christ can make satisfaction on our behalf. There is an important qualification here, since Thomas does not draw this connection explicitly with reference to Christ, but he does draw it with respect to satisfaction through the sacrament of penance. As Schwartz suggests, probably the best interpretation here is that Christ’s satisfaction makes it possible for us to be friends of God in the first place; Christ makes satisfaction for those who are not friends of God (nor are they even capable of being friends of God since they do not possess charity) in order that they may become friends once he has merited grace for them. But once one has received grace the situation is different. One may sin even though one possesses grace, and then one needs the sacrament of reconciliation; in this situation, a friend can aid one in the performance of satisfaction, most importantly in the case that one cannot perform the appropriate satisfaction oneself, though one wills to do so. The role charity plays here is clear: the person performing the act fulfills the external debt and as far as possible reverses the consequences of the previous offense, while the one who committed the wrong is (or becomes) united to the satisfier in love, and in willing the specific wrong to be redressed through the act of satisfaction. This logic makes sense even in the case of Christ’s initial act of satisfaction; even then, friendship is

205 ST, Supplementum, q.13, a.2.

206 Schwartz, Aquinas on Friendship, 160.
what enables merit to be shared, and friendship remains in a remarkably organic way the end of the act of satisfaction.

V. Conclusion: A Revised Satisfaction Account

In this chapter, Thomas’s account of atonement has provided both correctives and elaborations to what we found in Anselm. While it is not true that Anselm’s approach to satisfaction via an argument to necessity prevents him (or those who would follow his approach) from appreciating the diverse concepts and effects attributed to Christ’s work in the Christian tradition, it is true that Thomas displays this diversity in a more visible way than Anselm did in *CDH*. Even if we take Anselm’s broader concept of satisfaction, we might do well to apply it precisely by gathering together these various concepts and meditating on how each one contributes to the work of restoring creation to God’s intended end, and in such a way that God’s act reveals His nature in a maximally fitting way. And since it does not have a problem with including a diverse array of concepts, the broader view is preferable on the whole, since it provides a unifying rationale for them.

On the question of necessity, we have tried to take both Anselm and Thomas seriously and perhaps found a middle course: accept a Thomistic sort of critique of Anselm’s confidence regarding what we can know about the range of options potentially open to divine power and wisdom, and how accurately we can assess their relative fittingness, while, nonetheless, maintaining with Anselm if that of such options, God only does what is maximally fitting, and that He is nonetheless free and gracious in doing so. But one other thing this dispute helps reveal is that one can accept an Anselmian satisfaction account of atonement even if one does not finally accept Anselm’s argument for the necessity that God work in this way; one might hold instead that God opted to do
so when He could have done otherwise, and only given this contingent divine ordination of creation to a particular end, of Christ’s satisfying self-offering as the means to bring it to that end, is satisfaction truly necessary, and that this is knowable only in light of revelation.

Thomas’s inclusion (in a more obviously positive way) of aesthetic and literary connections within his reflection on the Passion helps to show how elements of atonement only mentioned briefly by Anselm can be developed further without any conflict. From a broad interpretation of satisfaction, we can say that such connections deepen our understanding of the full fittingness and beauty of Christ’s work, drawing out in us more and more the praise and love we have always owed to God. Likewise, the theme of friendship within Thomas’s work provided further conceptual depth to aspects only suggested briefly in CDH, especially the relationship between satisfaction and holiness. By situating satisfaction as aimed at establishing or restoring friendship, Thomas provided a rich and organic connection between satisfaction and holiness.

Our revised satisfaction account is thus somewhat broader than what we found in Anselm: it is compatible with a wider range of theological positions on other issues, and it is more obviously susceptible to addition and elaboration. Relatedly, it is easier to see that it does not have the weaknesses which are often attributed to Anselm’s view read in isolation—for example, that he cannot include other aspects of traditional Christian teaching on atonement, or that he reduces atonement to an impersonal exchange satisfying justice with no real connection to the Church or to a life of holiness. Nonetheless, satisfaction remains as the underlying rationale for everything Christ accomplishes in the atonement: by all of the effects and aspects of the atonement, God in
Christ has worked to bring about within humanity that relation to God for which we were created, satisfying that debt which above all others ought to be fulfilled, and bringing us thereby into friendship with God. In the next chapter, we will take up some contemporary lines of critique against satisfaction accounts, considering whether they hold against the account we have developed.
CHAPTER 5
SATISFACTION AND INJUSTICE: A RESPONSE TO CONTEMPORARY CRITIQUES OF SATISFACTION ACCOUNTS

*If the divine Wisdom did not impose these forms of recompense in cases where wrongdoing is endeavoring to upset the right order of things, . . . God would appear to be failing in his governance.*

Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*

With a revised Anselmian satisfaction account of atonement now in view, we can consider an important kind of contemporary critique that is generally taken to apply to satisfaction accounts. In particular, we will consider a form of critique offered mainly (though not exclusively) from feminist, womanist, and liberationist perspectives. This critique has to do with the apparent implications of a satisfaction account for how we should think about cases of injustice and oppression in human relationships, and alleges that accounts of atonement in which (like the one developed in this project) Christ makes satisfaction, pays the debt, or bears the punishment for the sin of humanity by passively undergoing unjust suffering and death support the ongoing suffering of the oppressed and abused. According to this critique, such accounts suggest that such undeserved suffering is like Christ’s, and therefore meritorious, or even sacred. It would follow, then, that accounts of atonement like the one developed here may appear to provide such sufferers with a reason not to resist or pursue justice against their abusers and oppressors. This critique merits serious attention, since, clearly, this would be a morally troubling result.
Here, I will argue that our account actually does not support ongoing abuse, but rather suggests that such instances will themselves call for justice in the form of satisfaction or punishment.

In this chapter, we will first try to spell out the general shape of the critique, and then offer an argument that our revised satisfaction account does not have the implications alleged by this critique; we will then develop this argument by applying it to two particular cases. Specifically, we will consider the case of spousal abuse, and the case of calls for reparations for the oppression of black people in the United for the injustice constituted by slavery and its legacy, since these cases (spousal abuse and slavery) are often given as examples in which some traditional accounts of atonement support the ongoing passive suffering of abuse as opposed to the pursuit of an end to or recompense for the unjust suffering.

A brief terminological note: here, by “passive suffering,” I mean only suffering without active resistance—no attempt to end the suffering. By forgiveness (or “mere” forgiveness), I mean continuing relating to a wrongdoer without enacting or seeking to enact any punishment or withholding of goods, either as a preventative or punitive measure. In the case of spousal abuse, forgoing such actions as physically resisting, calling the police, or moving out, would count as passively suffering and forgiving; in the case of American slavery and its legacy, it would mean simply bearing this evil and its ill effects without resistance, and forgoing the pursuit of reparations once they are ended. By the term “forgive,” then, I do not mean to include any particular emotional state, but just a state of affairs in which no consequences are imposed on the wrongdoer and the relationship between wrongdoer and victim remains as is.
I. The Critique

Now, how exactly are satisfaction accounts of atonement supposed to support passive suffering of abuse or oppression? Theologians often take the connection to be well-established, so that one can find statements like James Poling’s: “. . . certain interpretations of the cross clearly create the occasion for sexual and physical abuse of women and children . . .” According to research Poling cites, “[s]urvivors of abuse are saying that an abusive God and an abusive clergyman do not contradict the church’s theology.”

Many survivors of abuse learn from their churches that “[y]ou must sacrifice your own needs and wants, you mustn’t resist, mustn’t stand up for yourself . . .” But why does this practical inference follow from certain accounts of the atonement? Perhaps because, as Kathryn Tanner says, “In many [such models of atonement], one suspects God derives pleasure or satisfaction from death and suffering.”

Marit Trelstad summarizes the critique I am describing this way:

Feminist critiques of the cross image and atonement theories coordinate in four major issues. First, glorifying the cross potentially treats suffering as though it is God-given and inevitable. . . . Second, it valorizes passive suffering as redemptive. Third, the weight of ‘redemptive’ suffering is borne primarily by the oppressed and disadvantaged, and it is promoted and preached most often by those who stand to benefit from the suffering of others. Finally, it may lead to a human neglect of our individual and collective responsibility to end suffering and hold perpetrators of violence accountable. . . . Jesus’ vicarious suffering becomes critiqued as an


appropriate theological or anthropological model since it could disable
one’s own ability or confidence to stand up to oppression.\textsuperscript{210}

Many other similar quotations could be adduced, but this is enough to see the
basic shape of the critique. The assumption seems to be that whatever it is Jesus does to
save according to an account of the atonement implies something about the character of
God and about the kind of behavior that God values in human beings. These implications
are then applied to particular kinds of cases. When such application turns out to be
harmful and morally repugnant, then, we ought to reject the account of the atonement on
which the application is based—and, in the case of ‘traditional’ accounts, they have the
harmful and morally repugnant application that women and other marginalized or
oppressed people should continue passively in their oppression rather than actively
resisting.

The details of this critique are spelled out in different terms in the work of
different thinkers operating from distinct critical perspectives, but the crux of the issue
seems to be that we are “saved by what should not happen.”\textsuperscript{211} It appears that by saving
through the means of unjust suffering, that satisfaction accounts entails that God
approves of the unjust suffering (however this is unpacked), which by definition should
not happen. For instance, Delores S. Williams develops the concept of surrogacy (both
voluntary and involuntary) as a particular experience of black women in the context of
the American South, both in the antebellum and postbellum periods. She then identifies

\textsuperscript{210} Marit Trelstad, “Introduction,” in \textit{Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today},

\textsuperscript{211} To borrow a phrase from S. Mark Heim, “Saved By What Shouldn’t Happen: The Anti-Sacrificial
Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 211–24.
Christ in traditional accounts of atonement as the ultimate surrogate, providing a sort of
divine sanction to way black women are placed in surrogate roles, and thus hindering
possibilities for resistance.\textsuperscript{212} Rita Nakashima Brock argues that Anselm’s theology in
particular justified torture and imperialistic violence.\textsuperscript{213} As Lisa Sowle Cahill puts it, to
such critics, any account like ours here “sets up violence as divinely sanctioned and
encourages human beings to imitate or submit to it.”\textsuperscript{214} S. Mark Heim echoes this critique
as well:

\begin{quote}
In exalting Christ’s death, do we not glorify innocent suffering and
encourage people to passively accept roles as surrogate sufferers for
others, ‘in imitation of Christ?’ What earthy despot would not be glad to
have the weak and oppressed adopt this as their spiritual ideal? By making
the cross God’s recipe for salvation, do we validate violence as a divine
way of doing business?\textsuperscript{215}
\end{quote}

Rather than engage these various ways of articulating the critique in question
individually, here I want to offer a set of general premises meant to capture its logical
shape. These premises are not an exegesis of any text in particular, but hopefully they do
justice to an underlying way of reasoning that is applied in diverse ways. I have put these
theses in the language of satisfaction accounts of the atonement, so that I can then
consider whether the critique hits home specifically with respect to them, without
deciding whether it succeeds in other cases. As we have seen, the form of the critique

\textsuperscript{212} Delores S. Williams, “Black Women’s Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption,”

\textsuperscript{213} Mark Lewis Taylor, “American Torture and the Body of Christ,” in \textit{Cross Examinations: Readings on
the Meaning of the Cross Today}, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 244–47.

\textsuperscript{214} Lisa Sowle Cahill, “The Atonement Paradigm: Does It Still Have Explanatory Value?,” \textit{Theological
Studies} 68, no. 2 (Je 2007): 419.

hinges first on a certain account of the atonement, and then on inferences which generalize from there, and finally on an apparent analogy between the case of the person being abused or oppressed and the work of Christ in the atonement.

One final qualification is in order before we proceed further. Many of the authors who articulate versions of the critique we are considering here are interested at least as much in how religious people have applied traditional accounts of atonement to cases of injustice—how such accounts have been used, and what they appear to encourage, practically speaking—as they are in the question of whether these applications are actually justified by these accounts of atonement. Without denying the importance of the former concern, or contesting the historical claims involved in it, I am focusing here on the latter. That is, granting that people have appealed to the sort of interpretation of Christ’s saving work I have offered here in order to justify what is unjust, I am concerned with whether they have done so correctly. I am concerned not with what pastors have in fact said to those suffering unjustly based on satisfaction accounts of atonement, but with what pastors ought to say to them if our satisfaction account is true. I will present an alternative account of what our satisfaction account of atonement entails for these cases, one which suggests it can be used to resist oppression and articulate a demand for justice.

We can now move to the basic premises that seem to make for the analogy under critique. It seems that satisfaction accounts of atonement, among others, hold the following about Christ (C-propositions):

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216 The apparent justification provided by the example of Christ’s meritorious suffering or death for the passive suffering of an abuse victim might be interpreted various ways. At the most general level, it might be taken to follow simply from the fact that Christ’s undergoing of this sort of injustice was deemed as in some way good by God, and undergoing similar suffering passively makes one more like Christ. But it could be more specific. Perhaps the idea is that passive suffering of abuse could be a form of satisfaction or penance for the sins of the victim herself. Or, perhaps it could even be thought that such suffering could,
(C1) Christ’s passive suffering and forgiveness of undeserved violence is meritorious.

(C2) The merit so produced can be transferred to others so as to satisfy for their sins, including those who inflicted the violence directly.

(C3) Christ’s passive suffering and forgiveness of undeserved violence was God’s will for him.

From these, we can then infer some general (G) propositions:

(G1) Passive suffering and forgiveness of violence is possibly meritorious.

(G2) This merit can possibly satisfy for the sins of others, even those who inflict the suffering.

(G3) Passive suffering undeserved violence is possibly God’s will for a person.

And, specifically, in the case of a person undergoing abuse by spouse, an analogy is taken to apply as expressed in these case-specific (CS) propositions:

(CS1) Undergoing spousal abuse passively and forgiving is meritorious.

(CS2) The merit so produced can satisfy for sins, even perhaps the sin of the abuser.

(CS3) Passively suffering and forgiving in a particular case is willed by God.

What we have, then, is a movement from the work of Christ (what I have called C propositions) to more general claims about God’s attitude towards suffering (G propositions), and finally to the particular case of a person suffering unjustly (CS propositions).
propositions). This movement is encapsulated neatly in the advice which pastors are reported to give to suffering persons: “This is just your cross to bear.” In this one sentence, uttered in a context where the account of the atonement which undergirds it and provides its meaning is ubiquitous, the person suffering spousal abuse or oppression is advised to undergo their suffering passively and forgive, for doing so will make them like Christ and thus will be meritorious and pleasing to God. It follows then that any active steps to end or alleviate the suffering will amount to a deviation from God’s plan and perhaps a failure to behave in a Christ-like way towards the abusive spouse.

Surely, many Christians who are otherwise sympathetic to satisfaction accounts of the atonement can agree that such a blanket recommendation is problematic and would reject the implication that persons undergoing spousal abuse in general ought to suffer it passively. Are they being inconsistent? Drawing on the satisfaction account have developed in the previous chapters, I will argue here that that they need not be. In fact, I will argue that the opposite is true: a satisfaction account of atonement implies that wrongdoers should be required to make satisfaction to the one wronged or otherwise be punished.

II. Developing a Response: Does the Analogy Hold?

In response to the chain of reasoning involved in the critique we are considering, the first thing one might observe is that while set G seems to follow from set C, set CS does not necessarily follow from either set C or G. Just given that certain things hold in

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217 I have tried here to draw out the analogy as fully as I can, though I am not sure how commonly the idea expressed in C2, G2, and CS2 comes into play. It may perhaps be more common that the analogy is mainly thought of as implying suffering passively to be generally meritorious (C1, G1, CS1) and willed by God (C3, G3, CS3), and not as satisfying for particular sins of either the victim or the abuser.
the case of the work of Christ does not imply that they must hold in some other case. Indeed, C and G are compatible with the possibility that the Cross is the only case in which passive suffering happens to be meritorious or willed by God. In other words, the analogy between Christ and any given passive sufferer may not hold. In the case of spousal abuse, it could be (as I will argue in due course) that the proper analogy is not with Christ as satisfier, but with God as wronged person—implying not that victims should passively suffer and forgive, but instead that they (and any who provide such sufferers with pastoral or moral care) should, however possible, insist on an act of satisfaction or else punishment.218

The question of whether any instance of passive suffering is like Christ in the relevant ways will require a more detailed account of the conditions that make Christ’s passive suffering meritorious, so that we can say something about the range of cases in which affirming C and G would require affirming CS. In order to determine which analogy holds, we will turn back to our account of satisfaction in order to consider when satisfaction is appropriate, what its purpose is, and what are the conditions for a successful act of satisfaction. We need to consider, therefore, what the account of atonement we have developed in this project suggests; this will enable us to modify our inferential chain, qualifying it so as to clarify when an inference from C and G to CS would be appropriate. Applying this set of conditions to the case of ongoing spousal

218 Richard Purtill has also argued for this conclusion, observing that insisting on satisfaction as the most appropriate means of reconciliation is an imitation of the divine just as much as suffering in order to make satisfaction on behalf of another. See Richard L. Purtill, “Justice, Mercy, Supererogation, and Atonement,” in Christian Philosophy, ed. Thomas P. Flint, University of Notre Dame Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, no. 6 (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 42.
abuse will make it clear that passively suffering and forgiving in such a case will not turn out to lead to satisfaction.

*The Purpose and Conditions of Satisfaction*

Let us briefly recall some central features of our account of satisfaction. The purpose of satisfaction is the restoration (or perhaps the establishment for the first time) of friendship; it is called for when there is a rupture between one party and another caused by injustice. Friendship is a union between persons that has most fundamentally to do with the will: friends share a common end or love which they come to love in one another, and both the love of the end of the good will of the other orients each one towards the common acts which embody friendship. In a friendship between just persons, the most fundamental shared end of their wills must be justice, or, said differently, God. Understood this way, injustice is contrary to friendship because it involves a break in this union; the one carrying out the injustice fails to love the other one in the appropriate way. Even if the friend who is treated unjustly simply consents to the injustice, her intrinsic dignity and honor is still not properly upheld. Even if there is union between their wills, it would not be a union in justice, and thus such friends are not properly oriented towards their true end.

The most fundamental part of satisfaction, then, is the will. Satisfaction must be voluntary; if one does not will to set right the injustice one previously willed, then there is still no union of wills in justice and truth. In the absence of a will to set things right, one simply merits punishment. Even if one makes restitution, to do so unwillingly (perhaps to avoid some worse consequence) would turn the act of restitution into punishment, properly speaking, rather than satisfaction. Conversely, to undergo a penalty
willingly as a way of making restitution can count as satisfaction. If the will remains unjust, moreover, friendship—union of wills—is not restored. On our account, Christ makes satisfaction for the sins of others, but ultimately believers must participate in this satisfaction by their mind and will; those who do not come to know the truth about their sin and will along with Christ’s will to set it right out of love for God do not share in his satisfaction. God requires satisfaction not out of an abstract sort of justice, but out of the immutability of His intentions in creating human persons, and out of His wisdom by which He selects the most suitable means to bring them to fulfill those His intentions. That is, satisfaction is required by the fact that God still graciously intends the same relationship to Him for which He made humans to begin with, namely friendship.

Christ’s satisfaction on our behalf, then, is not an exchange disconnected from us that saves us independent of our actually coming to be friends of God; it is, rather, the means of establishing us as friends of God who were once enemies, and of restoring us to that friendship. Satisfaction thus embodies and enacts the love of God that friendship with Him entails in the context of human sin. It works by objectively rendering to God His due, but likewise subjectively by showing sinful humans how much God loves them and how much they ought to love Him, as well as inspiring them to do so, and meriting the grace by which they might do so on their behalf.

Understanding satisfaction this way points us back to the pedagogical aspect of satisfaction. To some degree, any assigned act of satisfaction teaches the unjust one what he ought to will: it expresses and enacts a claim (at the very least) about the gravity of the wrong done, what the cost of setting it right is, and thus it may install a sense of how much one ought not to have willed the injustice. This points, implicitly at least, to a more
positive claim about what the dignity of the one wronged called for in the first place. This pedagogical function explains why those with moral or legal authority to require or legislate or simply encourage acts of satisfaction have to consider both the objective requirements of justice and the subjective efficacy of the acts of satisfaction they assign. A particular act of satisfaction is more wisely assigned the more apt it is to habituate the mind and will of the wrongdoer into thinking and acting justly in the future. One point follows from this that will be important later: satisfaction needs to be fitting to the particular wrong done at a subjective as well as objective level. That is, it should be pedagogically fitted to the particular deformation of mind and will involved in the specific sort of injustice committed.

Relatedly, the pedagogical function of satisfaction, as well as its end of repairing a union of wills, helps to show how (and when) one friend can satisfy for another: when the act of satisfaction makes some degree of objective restitution to the one wronged, and when the will of the one who committed the wrong is joined to the satisfier in the act of satisfaction. Perhaps this is only appropriate when the one who owes satisfaction lacks the means to make it—this is certainly true, on our account, in the case of Christ’s satisfaction on behalf of sinful humanity. In any case, satisfying for another is only possible at all because an act of satisfaction carried out on one’s behalf can still fulfill both the objective and subjective sides of satisfaction: it can provide objective restitution to repair the injustice, and it can embody justice in such a way as to habituate the mind and will of the wrongdoer into truth and justice, and thus restore unity of wills.

On the other hand, we may well wonder how one can make satisfaction for another by suffering the very injustice one is undergoing. How, that is, could Christ’s
Passion satisfy specifically for the act of crucifying him? Satisfaction involves offering something of value to the person wronged. How could Christ’s murder constitute a gift to Christ? The answer to this marks something utterly unique about Christ’s saving work, and unlike other acts of satisfaction: the person who is the human being Jesus is also the God to whom Christ’s offering of faithfulness is directed. The one making the offering is also the one to whom the offering is given. It will not usually be the case that a victim’s unjust suffering can count as satisfaction for someone who inflicts that suffering, since that suffering is not gift of value to the one suffering. This is true by definition, it would seem, since anything which is truly a gift valued by the person to whom it is given will not be an injustice inflicted on that person; if it is an injustice inflicted, then it would be falsely named a gift, valued erroneously, and thus could not serve as a legitimate form of satisfaction.\footnote{What follows here is my own answer; but I think that it coheres with what we find in Anselm and Aquinas. In \textit{CDH} II.15, Anselm considers how Christ’s death can atone for the sin of murdering Christ. His answer is that the weight of the sin of murdering Christ is mitigated by the fact that those who killed him did not know the he is God, and thus it is outweighed by the goodness of Christ’s offering of himself. Notice, though, that in this answer, Anselm only considers Christ’s death as satisfaction towards God, not as a wrong specifically towards the Christ. This makes sense only if Christ is God, so that his faithfulness as a human being unto death can be an offering to himself. In \textit{ST} III, 48, ii, ad. 2, Thomas says that Christ’s death can atone for his murderer’s crime (even though he holds that at least some of those responsible knew what they were doing) because Christ’s love is greater than the malice of those who killed him; this too, it seems to me, assumes that the value of the offering and the weight of the offense are being considered with respect to God, since Christ’s good and faithful will expressed in his self-offering is an offering to God, and not to a human being as such. Elsewhere, in \textit{ST} III, 46, ii, co., Thomas insists that satisfaction requires something to be offered which is of value to the one who was wronged. So, it seems that it is in virtue of Christ’s identity with God that an offering of value to God is thereby an offering to Christ. In any case, it is clear that no matter how much goodwill a victim has towards a wrongdoer, that goodwill does not turn the wrongdoing into a gift of value to the victim, and so in general suffering wrongdoing out of love does not satisfy for the wrongdoing that causes the suffering to begin with.}

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Implications for the Analogy

Drawing on our satisfaction account, we have observed two relevant points about the concept of satisfaction they applied to the atonement. (1) The purpose of satisfaction is to reunite the wills of wrongdoer and the one wronged in truth and justice, enabling a just reconciliation so that the parties can live in peace and concord of wills. (2) Given this purpose, satisfaction requires an acceptance of the truth and a consequent movement of the will on the part of the wrong-doer. Satisfaction can be made by someone other than the wrong-doer, but only if this movement of the will takes place in the wrong-doer—only if the wrong-doer aligns his will with the satisfier, and thus also with the one wronged. In addition to this, we may now see a third point: suffering in itself, if it does not conduce to the achievement of this restorative purpose, is not meritorious or satisfactory. We must, on this view, admit that suffering in the pursuit of this end is praiseworthy—but, relevant to the critique we are considering, such suffering certainly cannot produce satisfaction unless it is part of an act that comes from the right kind of movement of the will (that is, one oriented towards a good end, and not towards the suffering for its own sake), and unless the wrong-doer’s will is aligned with that movement.

With these points in hand, we are now in a position to reconsider and qualify our C and G propositions. First, consider the propositions about Christ:

(C1) Christ’s passive suffering and forgiveness of undeserved violence is meritorious.

(C2) The merit so produced can be transferred to others so as to satisfy for their sins, including those who inflicted the violence directly.

(C3) Christ’s passive suffering and forgiveness of undeserved violence was God’s will for him.
On our satisfaction account, we can now see passive suffering is not inherently valuable or meritorious, nor are the unjust wills and actions of those who inflicted that suffering on him; instead, suffering towards a good end and motivated by a just will is meritorious. Second, the merit produced by Christ’s offering of himself can apply to others only on the condition that they are united to his self-offering via their will. Third, since inflicting suffering on an innocent is evil, God cannot possibly have willed that simply. Instead, on this account, God willed the good end for which Christ suffered as well as his faithfulness in pursuit of that end even unto death. For Anselm, then, the merit does not come from what should not happen (the unjust suffering), but by the love and faithfulness out of which Christ was willing to undergo even what he did not deserve to undergo.

So, our new, qualified C propositions will be:

(C4) Christ’s passive suffering and forgiveness of undeserved violence towards a good end and motivated by a just will is meritorious.

(C5) The merit so produced can be transferred to others so as to satisfy for their sins, including those who inflicted the violence directly on the condition that they are united to his self-offering via their will.

(C6) The good end for which Christ suffered, the good will out of which he suffered it, and the faithfulness with which he suffered, was God’s will.

In addition, we can add a condition of success for satisfaction; this will help clarify what the good end is, and from there we can think about what it means for suffering to be “for” that end:

(C7) satisfaction has been made successfully if and only if the will of the sinner is restored to unity in truth and justice with the will of God.

Our G propositions will now be:
Passive suffering and forgiveness of undeserved violence can be meritorious if it is for a good end and motivated by a just will.220

This merit can satisfy for a wrong committed by another, even those who inflict the suffering, if those others are united in will to the person who suffered, and if the suffering in some way constitutes a gift of appropriate value to the one wronged.

The end of just renewal of friendship between a wrongdoer and a wronged person is sometimes God’s will, and therefore the will to pursue that end in the face of suffering may be God’s will for a person.

Satisfaction has been made successfully if and only if the will of the wrongdoer is restored to unity in truth and justice with the will of the wronged person.

How should we think about the relationship between the success condition of G7 and the “for” and “end” clauses of G4-6? Minimally, I propose, if one is aware that an act cannot possibly contribute to the achievement of an end, then one cannot perform that act “for” that end, nor can one recommend it for that end. It probably would not make sense to require certainty or even knowledge that the success condition will actually be achieved—sometimes, surely, we ought to be willing to suffer towards an end that has low odds of success. Even so, it seems plausible that one must at least be in a position to think that an act is of the sort that it could possibly contribute to the achievement of an end in order to choose it for that end. So, finally, we can add:

An act can be considered for the end of satisfaction if it can possibly contribute to the achievement of satisfaction and is intended for that end.

ST Suppl. 15, 2 holds that patiently suffering “the scourges of the present life” can be satisfactory—but just insofar as they can be interpreted and accepted as deserved punishments for sin. Whatever one makes of this, it would not justify allowing ongoing injustice to continue where it can be ended, and it does not make undeserved suffering into a valuable thing in itself.
Application to the Case of Spousal Abuse

We are now in a position to consider the case of spousal abuse. Can passively suffering and forgiving ongoing abuse ever be analogous to Christ’s act of satisfaction as we unpacked it above—that is, can it fulfill the conditions in G4-G8? It seems that abused persons do sometimes passively undergo abuse because they believe this to be the best path to reconciliation—perhaps some believe they deserve it or that passively undergoing the abuse and forgiving will eventually move the abuser to love them. But what we are interested in here is whether or not such a course of action actually can be recommended as an act of satisfaction by analogy with Christ’s act of satisfaction as understood above, and therefore whether such a course really ought to be recommended if our account is true.

A brief analysis shows that passively suffering ongoing abuse cannot produce satisfaction for the abuse itself so as to reconcile the abused and the abuser: as long as abuse is ongoing, it is clear that the wills of the two parties are not restored to unity, or if they are, this unity is not in truth and justice. The wrong that is done against the dignity of the abused person needs to be redressed, both in will and in action, but, even if the abused spouse undergoes the violence willingly with the good of the abuser in mind, that violence cannot constitute a good for the victim. Indeed, even if the abuse stops and the former abuser does not sin any further against the dignity of the victim, a satisfaction account will imply that some further good ought to be required of the abuser in order to satisfy for the damage already done, whether we take an Anselmian view according to which it would be necessary, or a Thomistic view according to which it may usually be extremely appropriate though not strictly necessary. It may be possible for someone other
than the person who committed the abuse to aid in the act of satisfaction—even the victim herself. But the act which constitutes satisfaction must be a good for the victim. It is, therefore, hard to imagine how the passive suffering of the very abuse which requires satisfaction could turn out to be satisfactory.

Therefore, passive suffering and forgiveness of abuse within a marriage should not be recommended on analogy with Christ’s act of satisfaction, either to preserve the marriage or simply for the sake of imitating Christ. In fact, quite the opposite; a satisfaction account provides a reason for a victim or anyone pastorally responsible for a victim to insist that the abuse must stop, since ongoing abuse will show that the wills of the abuser and the victim are still at odds, or at odds with justice, and the wrongdoer, or someone appropriately related to the wrongdoer, should do (or will to do) something beyond simply stopping the abuse. Even if there is no reason to think further abuse will occur, a satisfaction account does not recommend mere forgiveness, for this would not adequately respect the honor of the one who was abused, nor will the will of the wrongdoer be just if it does not will to do something in the opposite direction of what it willed before—that is, if it does not will to make satisfaction. So, far from recommending passive suffering and forgiveness, the satisfaction account given above will actually lean against it rather strongly.\textsuperscript{221} In other words, one might suggest, if there

\textsuperscript{221} One might suppose, however, that since Christ has satisfied for all sin, that human beings included abused spouses ought to forgive one another on Christ’s account. But, for one thing, ongoing abuse would signal that the wrongdoer has not become united to Christ’s act in any case. But moreover, the right way to understand Christ’s act of satisfaction is that, as an offering to God, it merits forgiveness from God. It does not seem undo debts between human persons or institutions, otherwise it would have the result that criminals in general now ought to be forgiven so long as they repent. In fact, on the account offered by Aquinas, satisfaction still needs to be made between human beings. Indeed, human beings still need to participate in satisfaction toward God through the sacrament of penance.
is an appropriate analogy here, it is between the victim of abuse and God as wronged person rather than between the victim and Christ as satisfier.

Note that we have not discarded the view that suffering can be meritorious when aimed at a good end. What, we may ask, if one suffers (rather than pursuing the justice one could demand, and which, we have suggested, one ought to demand) to preserve the peace of a household and a family? Surely this is the sort of good end for which one ought to be willing to endure some cost. Here, Thomas’s understanding of justice within friendship is helpful. Marriage can be thought of as a form of friendship, the kind of concord of wills that inclines the friends towards common acts in pursuit of a common good, and towards delight in each other’s good will. But spousal abuse constitutes a break in this concord; the abusive spouse has failed to will the other’s good—and the good of one’s spouse would seem to be included in a special way in the end towards which the friendship of marriage is oriented.

When this severe sort of break has occurred, or (even worse) when it occurs habitually, the friendship cannot be upheld by forbearance. The peace which would be upheld this way is a false peace—a peace built on injustice. It is the sort of peace which ought to be disturbed so that true peace might possibly arise. Indeed, from this perspective we can see that allowing the abuse to continue will not even be good for the abuser—not truly. If compassion might motivate an abused spouse to forgo any pursuit of justice, she ought to be reminded that God’s good and compassionate will towards us expressed in the work of Christ is a will that never stops expecting us to be just, to be, in whatever sense creatures can, worthy of friendship with Him, even as He provides the means for us to do so. Unlike God, we cannot always provide each other the means of
making satisfaction, but we can imitate God at least in holding out hope for true justice and true peace. We do not necessarily do each other any favors, though, by settling for such grave injustice from those we love most. Out of love, then, we should expect that those whom we care about and hope to build genuine friendships with will desire and work to make satisfaction for serious wrongs they commit.

We should recall here that, in considering what sort of satisfaction to require, we must aim at pedagogical efficacy, and this requires attending to the details of the habitual deformation of the mind and will involved in the particular injustice committed. There are wrongs for which a sincere apology might be an appropriate satisfaction. Perhaps this is the case when the wrong involves only the kind of intellectual and volitional errors that are easily set right once understood consciously. But it seems highly unlikely that spousal abuse is this sort of wrong. On the contrary, it seems that abusers may feel and express deep sorrow in one moment but still commit the same injustice again in another moment. If this is so, it would suggest that one who commits spousal abuse very likely suffers from deeper habitual deformations of the mind and will—deformations which would take much more than an emotionally sincere apology to repair. The appropriate act of satisfaction might well be more long term in nature, perhaps even indefinite. In any case, assigning a proper act of satisfaction to an abuser would involve judgments about what sort of act might express and teach the movement of the will the abuser needs to make, which will likely require detailed knowledge of the particular case as well as of the psychology of abuse more generally.

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[222] I am grateful to Michael C. Rea and Kathryn Pogin for raising this point in a discussion of a presentation of an earlier version of this chapter.
Application to the Case of Slavery and Reparations

Another case where contemporary critics argue satisfaction accounts support oppression and undermine resistance is that of American slavery. Like in the case of women who suffer spousal abuse, the message satisfaction accounts are alleged to have conveyed, and to continue to convey, to black American Christians who suffered under slavery, Jim Crow, and other racial injustices, is that all of this is simply their cross to bear, and they should accept it without resisting or seeking justice. Here, I suggest that, on the contrary, our satisfaction provides a conceptual framework within which a demand for justice can be expressed with great force for those who hold such an account to be true. To show this, we can consider one form in which the demand for justice for victims of slavery and its legacy has been put forth, namely the call for reparations.

Before proceeding, some qualifications are in order. I will not offer an argument that, all things considered, the government of the United States should take any particular course of action, such as offering some form of reparations to the descendants of slaves, or that Christians ought to advocate for any such policy. To do that would require consideration and analysis of many historical and legal arguments which go well beyond the scope of this dissertation (not to mention the competence of its author). Instead, I simply want to draw attention to the shape of one such argument and how it can be bolstered and illuminated by our account of atonement. In particular, I will consider the line of argument presented by Ta Nehisi Coates in his widely discussed article, “The Case for Reparations.”223 I argue that the form of Coates’s argument resonates with a

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satisfaction approach to justice and reconciliation. This analysis will show, again, that a satisfaction account of atonement can be useful for analyzing cases of injustice and oppression, and provide language and conceptual tools for thinking about what is required to set things right, and why it is required. If my analysis is correct, it will not necessarily entail that a policy of reparations is obligatory or best—that would depend on the historical details of Coates’s case being essentially correct, and it would also depend on difficult judicial, legislative, and political judgments that cannot be pursued here. It will mean, however, that those who call for such measures can appeal to the atonement theology developed in this project in order to argue their case—and, conversely, that this account of atonement provides reasons for those who hold a satisfaction account of atonement to consider carefully the question of how to address the set of injustices to which some propose reparations as a form of redress. It would follow, then, that a satisfaction account of atonement does not have the implication that injustice or oppression should be accepted passively in this case; quite the opposite. Slavery and its

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224 Take, for instance, the historical question of what role slavery played in the development of the American economy. There is a growing body of research among historians (including but not limited to that cited by Coates) arguing that slavery and the effect it had on the cotton trade was essential to the rise of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution, and played a pivotal role in making America wealthy, particularly through a competitive (see, for instance, Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, Reprint edition (New York: Basic Books, 2016), Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, eds., *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), and Eric J. Hobsbawm and Chris Wrigley, *Industry and Empire: From 1750 to the Present Day* (The New Press, 1999). On the other hand, economic historians have challenged this account, arguing that slavery did not play such a pivotal role (see, for example, John E. Murray et al., “Roundtable of Reviews for *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* by Edward E. Baptist,” *The Journal of Economic History* 75, no. 3 (September 2015): 919–31. Now, of course slavery would be a grievous wrong whatever economic impact it turned out to have, but, for reasons that will become clear as we proceed, Coates nonetheless seems to think the fact (as he sees it) that it did lead to great wealth entitles the descendants of slaves to more than what they would be entitled to otherwise, since it would seem that slavery would constitute a greater theft the more valuable slave labor turned out to be. This is just one point at which the argument Coates makes can be contested. It is, therefore, well beyond the scope of this chapter to take any particular stance on his—instead, I am interested in what a satisfaction account suggests if his case is largely correct.
legacy can be understood as injustices calling for satisfaction, and reparations as one possible form that satisfaction might take.

Now, let us consider Coates’s case and see what the concept of satisfaction I have sketched here might suggest about it. For much of his essay, Coates traces a history of the economic supremacy of white people in America. The institution of slavery holds a significant and foundational place in this history as Coates tells it. According to research he cites, in the antebellum period, cotton produced by slave labor accounted for 59 percent of American exports, and slaves themselves “were the single largest . . . financial asset of property in the entire American economy.”225 On Coates’s telling, the foundational historical injustice is this: vast wealth was thus created by the forced labor of slaves, extracted through horrific violence, as well as the sundering of their families and the theft and sale of their children.

The injustice Coates identifies, however, does not end with emancipation. It continues on in the political and economic marginalization of blacks under Jim Crow and segregation, and then to discriminatory policies enacted by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) as well as real estate associations, banks, and other lending institutions. “Discriminatory laws,” he says, “joined the equal burden of citizenship to unequal distribution of its bounty.”226 The overall effect has been to produce and maintain a “wealth gap” between black families and white families. The policy of redlining by the FHA is a particularly striking example; while the FHA enabled white neighborhoods to grow and develop, essentially funneling public money into them to


226 Ibid., 9.
subsidize home ownership, it considered any neighborhood in which blacks or foreigners lived to be unfit. Loans for homes in those neighborhoods usually could not receive FHA backing. This discrimination in the housing market paved the way for predatory lenders to take advantage of black families, who could not get legitimate loans even if they had decent income. By tracing individual stories as well as providing broader historical context and data, Coates provides a compelling argument that the policies which enabled white families to achieve greater levels of prosperity systematically excluded black families.

Coates draws attention to the role all of this unjustly accumulated and distributed wealth played in enabling the realization of core American ideals (disproportionately for whites), such as autonomy, independence, and prosperity (expressed especially, perhaps, through home ownership). These are ideals which seem to have moral freight for Americans. They are pieces of a broadly shared vision of the good life, the sort of good which our founding documents and laws and policies seem to proclaim that people ought to have, or at least they ought to be able to have them. For these goods to be realized and preserved for one segment of the population by systematically denying them to another seems to be a serious injustice, not just between one citizen and another, or one group and another group, but of the body politic, the nation as such, towards the marginalized group. For this historically extended injustice, Coates argues the US government itself ought to pursue reparations, specifically through an act of Congress empowering a commission to study the damage done to black Americans through this whole history of slavery and its continuing effects. Having studied this damage carefully, honestly, and
comprehensively, we would be in a position to consider what possible reparation could be made.

What Coates is calling for is, in other words, an act of satisfaction. He is attempting to identify a grave injustice which has not been righted. Slavery was ended, and this is good, but its full gravity was not publicly recognized. Or, if it was, the truth of that gravity was not manifested in an appropriate act of satisfaction. The result has been a situation of deeply embedded moral incoherence. The story we tell ourselves about our values does not fit with the reality of our history. Once we recognize the truth, however, we must see that an act of satisfaction is called for; satisfaction would then make possible a just reconciliation. This idea of coming to admit the truth is a central feature of Coates’ argument. He equates reparations with

the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences . . . the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely . . . an airing of family secrets, a settling with old ghosts . . . a healing of the American psyche and the banishment of white guilt . . . a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal . . . a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history.227

Of course, it seems likely that a full accounting might reveal to us that no adequate satisfaction is possible. Coates admits as much. Even so, he insists, wrestling publicly with these questions matters as much as—if not more than—the specific answers that might be produced. An America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens is improved and humane. An America that looks away is ignoring not just the sins of the past but the sins of the present and the certain sins of the future. More important than any single check cut to any African American, the payment of reparations would represent America’s maturation out of the childhood myth of its innocence into a wisdom worthy of its founders.228

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227 Ibid.

228 Ibid.
Critics of the idea of reparations, of course, remain skeptical at various points, and perhaps rightly so. Even given the accuracy of Coates’s historical narrative, they may wonder why it was not enough simply to end slavery. Or, they may wonder how a failure to do justice to freed slaves should have any bearing on their descendants, why the sins of the past have bearing on the present. They may wonder why or how the different injustices Coates traces through different eras are connected such that their damage should be counted together, and a single act of satisfaction should be offered as a redress. They may wonder how it could help matters to discover that no amount could possibly be considered adequate as satisfaction. They may also have important practical concerns: can reparations be made in this case without being made in many other cases? Can it feasible economically? Would such a transfer of wealth at the expense of taxpayers not greatly increase racial tensions? Coates makes his own attempts to answer these questions, as have other advocates of reparations, but adjudicating them decisively is beyond the scope of this project. I simply want to note here that a satisfaction account of Christ’s atoning work provides us with some things to say about some of these issues, even if it cannot provide enough to settle the matter.

According to the Anselmian account of atonement we have developed here, our first parents put us in a situation of moral disorder and debt towards God. If this is so, it would appear that past injustices, carried out by people long dead, may need to be set right in the present. After all, according to our account of atonement, an ancient, original sin plays a crucial (though not exhaustive) role in explaining the current status of the human family before God, and, indeed, the proclivity of individual humans towards sin. Christians should thus be well aware that moral communities are shaped by their past,
and that the mere passage of time does not erase or put an end to the moral damage that is done by injustice.

The pedagogical aspect of the need for satisfaction helps illuminate this further. A community’s response to an injustice expresses a moral valuation of that injustice; a failure to make or require satisfaction expresses a false moral valuation. Those who accept this false moral valuation will be more inclined to commit similar injustices. The history Coates tells illustrates this process: a nation which grew prosperous in a grossly unjust way owed something to the segment of its citizens of whom it took violent advantage. When it failed to make good on this debt, the nation thereby expressed an overall moral judgment. Slavery was ended, but the great disparity in wealth and political status was allowed to continue—affirmed, in effect, as natural and just. It would not be surprising, then, if, even though slavery itself was ended, the project of establishing and maintaining a “wealth gap” continued in various ways. The particular means of slavery had to be discarded, but its results had to be protected as if they were just. The satisfaction account we have developed suggests that a full and true accounting of the gravity of that wrong will be needed, or at least more naturally conducive, to set all of this right, and enable genuine friendship between the wronged people and the government of the nation who wronged their ancestors, as well as those who have benefited to greater or lesser degrees from that wrong.

We have seen that the aim of satisfaction is the restoration or establishment of friendship, but would an act of reparation achieve this? Certainly it must be said that governments cannot effectively force parties at odds with one another to become friends. But it does seem that one function of a government is to insure that the conditions under
which friendship is genuinely possible between the various groups of its citizens.

Performing an imposed act of satisfaction does not, of course, entail that the one carrying it out truly wills justly towards the wronged party, nor that the wronged party will now welcome the former wrongdoer in friendship. Even so, once justice is established, the possibility of friendship is greater than it was before. At the very least, an imposed act of satisfaction expresses a kind of call to the wrongdoer to repent, along with guidance regarding how to do so, along with an opportunity for the wronged party to forgive with dignity. Even if such acts are not strictly necessary, it is often the case that they are the most conducive towards friendship.

What follows, however, if satisfaction cannot be made? On an Anselmian account, of course, we appeal to Christ’s infinitely valuable self-offering to make it possible for us to become just before God. The infinitely valuable gift of Christ—at one and the same time God’s gift to humanity and humanity’s gift to God—may well enable Christians to forgive each other on Christ’s behalf beyond what would be possible outside of the order of grace. Perhaps a nation as deeply fractured by injustice as the United States must, ultimately, look to God’s just mercy for any chance of genuine reconciliation and healing. Still, it must be said, this hope does not excuse us from doing what is possible. The just soul will desire to make satisfaction; if full satisfaction is impossible (or, perhaps, if it is not possible without incurring worse evils), then surely we must do whatever is possible, and only then appeal to Christ to make up what we lack. Satisfaction may not require objective equality with the wrong when it is not possible, but it still requires what is possible.
III. Satisfaction as a Resource for Responding to Injustice

In both of the cases we have considered, a satisfaction account of Christ’s work provides a powerful set of concepts to which Christians might appeal in order to advocate for justice to those who have been wronged. We have not done away with the idea that suffering can, at least when unavoidable or when it is for a morally compelling purpose, unite one to the sufferings of Christ—but this idea has deep roots in Christian thought and spirituality (to say nothing of its roots in the New Testament), and there are other reasons why it does not seem desirable to discard this idea entirely. After all, if oppressors and despots would find it beneficial for their victims to see passive suffering as praiseworthy because it makes them like Christ, then surely those despots would also benefit if their victims believed that all suffering, even for the sake of justice, should always be avoided, and is never praiseworthy or Christ-like.

We have tried, instead, to develop an account that allows us to maintain a difficult tension. On the one hand, unjust suffering calls for justice and is not valuable for its own sake—indeed, we might more accurately say that it is of negative value. On the other hand, suffering can be borne for the sake of justice in a beautiful and praiseworthy way—and, precisely as beautiful and praiseworthy, such suffering for the sake of justice can provide for positive value required to set right an injustice. It is the latter, and not the former, which we attribute to Christ, and which we are called to imitate. While such a message can certainly be twisted to ill purpose, the abuse of this principle does not negate its proper use. And, if it provides comfort to despots that they might suppress resistance by enjoining their victims to imitate Christ, it ought to trouble them to that imitators of Christ will be willing to suffer in order to protect and aid those who are oppressed.
Moreover, in both cases, we can see how a satisfaction account of atonement provides a conceptual basis for victims of injustice to articulate a demand for justice from those who have wronged them. The basis of such a demand would include the victims’ own dignity, which has its part to play within the moral beauty and integrity of their larger communities and indeed the universe as a whole. It would also include the true and proper dignity of the ones who wronged them: satisfaction is the way to restore justice to both, albeit in different modes. In our satisfaction account of atonement, even though in the Christ God bears the cost of setting things right, He does it in such a way that the payment is truly offered by the ones who need to pay it, since they join their wills to Christ the satisfier. God provides for satisfaction rather than simply forgive and passively bear the injustice of human sin precisely because it is better that justice be done towards God’s honor. On the other hand, God provides for satisfaction rather than simply punishing, because satisfaction restores the wrongdoers to their proper dignity as well.

So, our account provides a way for victims of injustice to call for justice, and to do so while also maintaining a Christ-like concern for the good of those who wronged them.

Returning to our earlier summaries of the critiques leveled against ‘traditional’ atonement theology, we can now ask, do these critiques apply to our satisfaction account? Does this account “treat suffering as though it is God-given and inevitable”? No; it presents suffering in general as the result of sin; it does (realistically, it seems) take for granted that sometimes setting things right has a high cost. Does it “valorize passive suffering as redemptive”? No, passive suffering is not seen here as redemptive in and of itself, though for a good end it is certainly admirable. Does it place “the weight of ‘redemptive’ suffering . . . [on] the oppressed and disadvantaged,” and support those who
stand to benefit from the suffering others in preaching that their victims ought to passively suffer? No, for although atonement language certainly has been used in this way, properly understood, a satisfaction view like the one outlined above provides the terms in which such use can be corrected. On this view, it is those who commit oppression who need to make satisfaction; the continued suffering of oppressed people is not analogous to the suffering of Christ—except insofar as Christ’s death also involved a grievous wrong. This recognition that what oppressors do to the oppressed is like what was done to Christ, however, only underlines the dignity and worth of the oppressed, and therefore the moral horror of oppression. Does it, when properly understood, lead to the neglect of our individual and collective responsibility to end suffering and hold perpetrators of violence accountable? Again, the answer is no; if a satisfaction account like Anselm’s holds true, then good governance requires (for Anselm, even of God) that perpetrators of violence be held accountable. On the view we have developed here, the moral integrity of a community depends on (or at least is facilitated by) satisfaction for—and therefore, a fortiori, an end to—every instance of unjust suffering.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUDING REMARKS

For this reason . . . I present . . . the enclosed little work . . . with the aim that those items in it which are acceptable may receive approval . . . and those which are in need of correction may be put right.

Anselm of Canterbury, Cur Deus Homo, Commendatio

Let us briefly recapitulate what I have tried to accomplish in this project. My goal has been to develop and defend an Anselmian satisfaction account of Christ’s atoning work. I began, in Chapter 2, by articulating a motivation for the project through a critical analysis of the paradigm under which atonement theology is most commonly done, the atonement theory paradigm. Under that paradigm, we are to assume that the basic elemental claims of scripture and tradition about the atonement are fundamentally alternatives, if taken as straightforwardly literal theological proposals. Some make a narrow selection within the tradition to the exclusion of others, while some attempt to rescue the set of concepts applied to Christ’s work in the tradition by naming them metaphors or models held together in some loose or functional arrangement, each one being at best useful insofar as it communicates some theological truth besides what it seems to claim directly. I argued that in fact these basic elemental claims (viz. that on our behalf Christ overcame the devil, that he heals our natures, that he offers himself as a perfect sacrifice, that he provided us with a saving teaching and example, and so on) are, by and large, not prima facie contradictions at all, and so it would be most desirable from
the point of view of faith seeking understanding to have an account of atonement which holds these claims together coherently, taken as straightforward theological claims whenever possible.

While Anselm is usually taken to be perfectly in line with the atonement theory paradigm, offering a new theory as opposed to other theories, in Chapter 3, I develop a revised interpretation of his thought, one that presents his approach as a genuine alternative to the atonement theory paradigm. This re-reading involved close attention to Anselm’s background theological commitments, laid out in more detail in his earlier treatises. With these in view, we are able to see that satisfaction is not, for Anselm, a matter of God feeling insulted, or of the Son changing the Father’s mind about humanity. Instead, satisfaction is rooted in the God’s immutable commitment to accomplish His supremely good purposes in creating, which included that human persons should receive the reward of beatitude for fulfilling the highest purposes of their nature: striving to know God and to love Him above all things. Satisfaction means that God is committed to bringing humanity to fulfill its intrinsic purpose, and give us a place in beatitude as a reward, even though we have fallen into sin.

Indeed, God grants a greater dignity to us by providing with the means to fulfill the purpose of our nature and to offer to Him, in Christ, a gift which fittingly merits the reward of beatitude, than if He simply gave us beatitude in spite of sin. Since God needs nothing at all, and His own intrinsic honor is rooted in His own nature and cannot be harmed, satisfaction is not to God’s benefit, but to ours, because of His profound goodness and mercy. In providing for us to make satisfaction, God grants us by grace the ability to offer to Him that gift which is our deepest joy to offer. That gift, of course, is
not Christ’s suffering or murder, which are intrinsically evil acts and as such cannot be willed by God per se, but rather Christ’s good, beautiful, and just will to be faithful to God even at the cost of His own life. It is that will and obedience towards God which constitutes at the same time humanity’s fitting offering to God, and the highest exercise of human nature and dignity.

In light of the fall of the devil, God called humanity to embody the intrinsic purpose of their natures through a specific task, namely resisting the devil’s temptation in the Garden. Satisfaction is just the restoration to God of what He justly asked for, and in a way that honors Him even further than what He initially asked for. So Christ’s work fittingly includes a human victory of the devil. Further, since the purpose of satisfaction is to restore human persons to the state for which God created them, and since human beings learn by example and instruction of one who has overcome their same struggles, it is fitting that Christ’s satisfying work also include an example for us to follow who also suffers as a human person. In this way, Anselmian satisfaction is not an alternative to the Christus Victor and moral exemplar theories; on the contrary, it provides them with an underlying logic which binds them together and enables us to understand them (along with other facets of Christ’s work) in a unified way. Anselm’s account thus has much to recommend from the perspective of faith seeking understanding.

With this satisfaction account in view, in Chapter 4, I attempt to broaden and develop it beyond simply expositing Anselm’s thought. Through engagement with the thought of Thomas Aquinas, we can see some important ways in which Anselm’s satisfaction account can be expanded and corrected. For one thing, although Anselm’s view that the Incarnation and Cross were necessary deserves defense from some of the
critiques which have been leveled against it, nonetheless Thomas’s approach which
refuses to assert necessity of divine acts seems a wise and helpful corrective. For another,
although Anselm’s treatise is not comprehensive, Thomas provides further material that
is easily compatible with it, such as can be seen in his more clearly positive reflection on
the role of aesthetic and literary fittingness, and his more detailed account of the
relationship between Christ’s atoning work and the growth of believers into holiness and
friendship with God. The result of this detour through Thomas’s thought, hopefully, is a
fuller and broader sense of what is possible for a satisfaction account than we could get
from Anselm alone.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I attempt to defend the account developed up to this point
against a common form of critique normally leveled against satisfaction accounts. The
critique I consider alleges that satisfaction accounts inherently support ongoing
oppression. Examples usually cited include cases of spousal abuse (where women are
told, on the basis of accounts of atonement like and including satisfaction, that abuse is
their cross to bear) and racial oppression (where slaves or those suffering under
subsequent oppression are told essentially the same thing). I have tried to offer a fair
analysis of the inference involved in saying that an oppressed person must simply accept
their oppression in imitation of Christ; I argued, however, that this inference does not
quite follow from the satisfaction account developed in this project. Suffering for justice
out of a good will is valuable, of course—that sort of suffering is indeed an imitation of
Christ. But if the injustice that is causing the suffering can itself be set right, and if
continuing to suffer it achieves no particular good, then it is perfectly appropriate to seek
justice from the oppressor. Indeed, satisfaction is often the most appropriate path towards
a restoration of genuine friendship between wrongdoer and wronged person, as evidenced by the fact that this is how God achieves our reconciliation with Him.

More positively, I have tried to show that this account can provide a compelling resource for analyzing cases of human injustice. I consider two sorts of cases in order to show how our satisfaction account can actually illuminate what is happening and why passive suffering and mere forgiveness often are not conducive to justice. In the cases of spousal abuse and calls for reparations for slavery and racial injustice in the United States, the pedagogical aspect of satisfaction, along with its role in establishing or restoring friendship between wrongdoer and wronged, helps us to see why an act of reparation is good for the oppressor, as well as what is ideally involved in a proper act of satisfaction. Among other things, an act of satisfaction should be fitted to the wrong, not just in terms of proportionality, but also in terms of teaching the wrongdoer (through the required act) what he really ought to will with respect to the one he wronged. Moreover, an act of satisfaction enables the wronged party to forgive without doing damage to his own intrinsic dignity.

What is the upshot of all of this? There are certainly other important critiques of satisfaction accounts that I have not taken up. There are also other ways of trying to gather together the various theological claims known as atonement theories into a coherent and unified account, and I have not provided an argument that these are each less successful than my Anselmian account. There is, too, much more to say than I have been able to do in detail about how a satisfaction account gives us a framework within which we can understand many diverse aspects of Christ’s work besides those central ones I have mentioned explicitly (I have not mentioned, for instance, Christ’s fulfillment
of the Law and of Israel’s mission, for instance). To the extent that I have argued successfully, however, I have provided a substantial set of reasons for finding a satisfaction account plausible and promising over and against single-theory and kaleidoscopic accounts. I have also provided a basis for future work which would address these shortcomings, considering other critiques and expanding my account into a more comprehensive interpretation of the Gospel narratives and of the growth of the Christian into holiness through the Church’s sacramental, liturgical, and devotional life. This much would merit a genuine contribution to contemporary atonement theology. My most ambitious hope, however, is that my project might in some way contribute to the intellectus fidei, and enable the faithful to enter more deeply, joyfully, and gratefully into the mystery of God’s saving work in Christ.
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