Participation and Atonement

An Analytic and Constructive Account

Oliver D. Crisp

Participation and Atonement

An Analytic and Constructive Account

Oliver D. Crisp

BakerAcademic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

Part 1 Approaching the Atonement 9

1. Methodological Issues 13
2. The Value and Necessity of Atonement 35

Part 2 Models of Atonement 55

3. Moral Exemplarism and Transformation 59
4. The Ransom Motif 77
5. Satisfaction Guaranteed 95
6. Problems with Penal Substitution 119

Part 3 Atonement and Salvation 147

7. Sin and Salvation 151
8. Representation and Atonement 175
9. The Mystical Body of Christ 207
10. Soteriological Synthesis 229

Bibliography 241

Index 253

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

Introduction

Often theologians are formed through apprenticing themselves to the work of one or more past masters in the great tradition of Christian doctrine. It is a good way to develop and refine one's theological sensibilities. Working closely with the texts and thought of a historic theologian leaves an indelible impression upon the work of those who follow in their footsteps. That is true even when the apprentice strikes out to become a practitioner in her or his own right.

For better or worse, I am an apprentice of several such past masters on the doctrine of atonement, and my work reflects their influence. From Athanasius and Irenaeus I have learned that the incarnation is as important to the notion of human reconciliation to God as the cross. From Anselm of Canterbury I have learned about the shape of atonement theology and the structures that underpin it, as well as much besides that about the nature and purposes of God, and of theological method. From Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Karl Barth I have learned about the overall shape of Christian doctrine, and about the substitutionary nature of Christ's saving work. But it is the great New England pastor-theologian Jonathan Edwards who has, in many respects, shaped my thinking more deeply than any other thinker in this regard.

When I was a doctoral student in philosophy of religion working through Edwards's views about the metaphysics of sin, I ended up thinking about his understanding of the relationship between Adam and Christ in a way that reflects the Pauline "Adam Christology" of Romans

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

5:12–19.[1] As I was engaged in this task, I noticed that Edwards thought about the relationship between Adam and his progeny and between Christ and his elect in a manner that was very different from the sort of forensic doctrine that I had imbibed from the other Reformed theologians to whom I had been exposed up to that point. Rather than thinking of Adam and his progeny as united by means of a kind of moral and legal arrangement according to which God imputes Adam's sin to his offspring and imputes the sin of Adam's offspring to Christ and Christ's righteousness to the elect, Edwards drew a different lesson. He taught that the real union between Adam and his offspring, and between Christ and his elect, is the foundation for any legal union. The real union between the two is more basic than the forensic.

This simple claim is at the heart of Edwards's thinking about the nature of salvation. By means of this concept one can unlock much of the often convoluted and difficult things Edwards says about atonement, justification, and union with Christ. This in itself was interesting to me as a young scholar and apprentice of the Northampton Sage (as Edwards is often called). But what was more important was the fact that this set me off in search of other resources to try to spell out what Edwards had intimated in his thinking about Adam Christology and its relation to the atonement.

This quest led me to the work of other Reformed thinkers who held to a similar view about the fundamentality of union with Christ and notions of participation in their thinking about Adam Christology. I ended up writing a book in search of some of these answers in dialogue with another Reformed divine from the century after Edwards's death, William G. T. Shedd.[2] He shared many theological sensibilities with Edwards on the matter of the relation between Adam and Christ, but he cast his account in the idiom of an Anglicized German idealism rather than that of the empiricist-imbued immaterialism of Edwards. Other interlocutors I encountered at this juncture included John Williamson Nevin, one of the leaders of the Mercersburg Theology. Among other things, he directed me back to the study of John Calvin.[3] In the *Institutes* I found more grist to the mill in Calvin's emphasis on union with Christ and participation in

1. The results of this rumination can be found in Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards and the Metaphysics of Sin*.

2. See Crisp, *American Augustinian*.

3. See Crisp, "John Williamson Nevin on the Church."

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

the divine life. Thomas F. Torrance provided a bridge from Calvin and the Scottish theology I had imbibed as an undergraduate to patristic accounts of the atonement. Kathryn Tanner's work on incarnation and atonement, which drew deeply from similar sources as Torrance, underlined the importance of the patristic witness to notions of participation in the divine life.[4] Through these theologians I found my way back to the theology of Athanasius and Irenaeus. What I discovered there was electrifying. They too had a sense that through participation in Christ we are united to God.[5] From there it was a short but crucial step to the recent literature on the notion of theosis, or divinization, and its recovery in recent Western theology (with particular thanks to my friends Julie Canlis and Carl Mosser). This was also a notion to be found in Edwards.[6] I had come full circle.

This outline of my own intellectual journey in pursuit of a better understanding of the saving work of Christ is far too neat, of course. There were many dead ends and frustrations along the way, and not a few missteps on my part as well. However, I think it is worth narrating this at the outset of a work like the present one because more often than not what the reader holds in his or her hands in a published work is the product of a great deal of intellectual struggle, though this is often not declared by the author. The work you hold in your hands, dear reader, is one such product. In writing it, I had to revise and rethink a number of key issues over the course of more than a decade. This has not been easy, and has certainly delayed publication. But research projects have a habit of taking us in directions we had not anticipated, perhaps especially if we are existentially invested in the outcome.

In this work, I set out to give an account of the nature of the atonement. The central question that drives this volume is as follows: *What is the mechanism by means of which Christ's work reconciles fallen human beings to God?* In the course of the volume, I give some account of various traditional ways of thinking about this topic, and I offer a constructive, participatory account of my own—which I call the *representational account of atonement*. This volume is, in important respects, a companion and sequel to my previous work entitled *The Word Enfleshed*. There I

4. The produce of such engagement can be found in the essays in Crisp, *Revisioning Christology*.

5. I have discussed the work of Athanasius and Irenaeus in Crisp, *Approaching the Atonement*.

6. I worked on this aspect of his thought in Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards on God and Creation*.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

sought to provide a joined-up account of the work of Christ that took seriously the fact that it included the incarnation as well as the death and resurrection of Christ. The atonement is not just about the cross, though this is a crucial component of it—or so I sought to argue. *The Word Enfleshed* was, in many respects, a bridge project that connected my previous work on the doctrine of the incarnation with my current concern with the atonement.[7] In *The Word Enfleshed*, I also provided a sketch of a view of the atonement that I called the *realist union account*, and which I develop in important respects here. The current work is more narrowly focused on the nature of the atonement than was *The Word Enfleshed*. Although it can be read independently of my earlier work, the two books are really two phases of one work, or two installments of a single research project.

In the present volume, I try to give a rather different and hopefully more thorough, nuanced, and carefully worked out account of atonement, setting it into a broader context of soteriology, or the doctrine of salvation. In the intervening period between the two works on atonement, my views have changed somewhat so that the version of the doctrine set forth here is different from that given in *The Word Enfleshed*. Not only do I offer a new treatment of the nature of atonement, but I also distinguish between the mechanism of atonement and the consequences of atonement in union with Christ brought about by the Holy Spirit. I think these represent important developments in my thinking. They are connected to the way in which my views about the nature and transmission of original sin have developed in the last decade as well. Thus, the constructive section of the book tackles original sin and the nature of atonement as well as regeneration and union with Christ through the Holy Spirit—all in pursuit of an answer to the central research question that motivates the work. Of course, just how significant a development in my work this constitutes is for others to judge.

Outline of the Book

With the central thesis of the book made clear, let me turn to outline the chapters that follow. The work is divided into three sections. Part 1 is

7. I have also written a short introductory textbook on the atonement, *Approaching the Atonement*, which presents various historic attempts to articulate the doctrine of atonement along with a brief constructive chapter at the end.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

entitled "Approaching the Atonement" and deals with preliminary matters. Chapter 1 begins with a ground-clearing exercise, focused on methodological issues. It tackles how we should think about the nature of atonement as a central component of Christ's reconciling work and what language we should use in talking about it.

Having set some conceptual parameters, chapter 2 considers the two related questions of the value and necessity of atonement. It is often said that Christ's saving work has an infinite value because it is the work of someone who is both divine and human. But what does that mean? It is also often said that the atonement is in some sense necessary for human salvation. But necessary in what sense? Why must God bring about atonement in this costly way, if indeed he must bring about reconciliation at all? This chapter considers these important preliminaries.

The second section of the work turns to consider some of the most important historic treatments of atonement in the Christian tradition. These are often rehearsed in textbooks on the subject, and frequently the way in which they are showcased takes a fairly traditional, even well-worn, shape. In the chapters of this section, I try to address some of the major historic models of atonement while also problematizing the way in which they are often presented in textbooks on the topic. Nevertheless, I shall argue that these historic accounts of atonement, as they are usually presented today, are all incomplete or mistaken in various respects. They need some corrective, or some additional component; something seems to be missing. It is just this missing component that I seek to provide in the final constructive section of the book.

Chapter 3 looks at the doctrine of moral exemplarism. This is the idea that Christ's moral example should motivate fallen human beings to live a life that reflects God's love for us. Sometimes this is (mistakenly) associated with the medieval Parisian theologian Peter Abelard. More often than not, the version of the doctrine that is set out is a kind of caricature rather than the most sympathetic or charitable version of it. In this chapter, I set out two versions of moral exemplarism, drawing on the recent work on transformative experience by philosopher L. A. Paul. It is tempting to think that moral exemplarism does not, in fact, present us with a doctrine of atonement at all but rather with a way of thinking about the work of Christ that is nonredemptive. For, so it might be thought, a moral example may motivate us to live a particular kind of life. But that is quite different

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

from being saved by some act on our behalf. It is the difference between being told to be brave like the firefighter who plucks people from burning buildings and actually being rescued by the firefighter from the midst of a blaze. However, I shall argue in this chapter that there is a version of moral exemplarism that does amount to a doctrine of atonement—just a rather conceptually thin one. This is a somewhat surprising result. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the doctrine is appropriately thought of as one aspect of a richer account of Christ's reconciling work rather than as a stand-alone doctrine. This should become clear in the third part of the volume.

Chapter 4 takes up the ransom account of atonement. This has become one of the most talked-about accounts of the work of Christ in contemporary theology, and it is often—mistakenly—thought to be the default option in patristic doctrines of atonement. This chapter provides an account of the conceptual shape of the doctrine and its shortcomings. I argue that it is an important motif in thinking about the atonement but that it does not amount to a complete doctrine of atonement because it does not provide a clear understanding of the mechanism involved. Instead, it is an incomplete but potentially helpful way of thinking about one aspect of Christ's reconciling work.

Chapter 5 considers the doctrine of satisfaction, particularly with reference to the works of Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas. Today this is a much-maligned account of Christ's work, though it is arguably the most influential account of atonement in the Christian tradition. I attempt a partial defense of the doctrine as a coherent—though, in Anselm's case, incomplete—account of atonement. It provides a helpful way of framing Christ's reconciling work as a satisfaction of divine honor, not as a punishment. In the course of the chapter, I also deal with some recent criticism of the doctrine raised by Eleonore Stump.

The last chapter in this section is chapter 6. In it, I give some account of penal substitution and its shortcomings. This is by far the most criticized historic account of the atonement, though it is not without its defenders. I shall recount some of the most significant traditional objections to the doctrine. Although I think there are some serious shortcomings to the doctrine, as there are to the doctrine of satisfaction, I think it does raise important issues that may be transposed into a different key as part of a richer union account of atonement that is the subject of the succeeding chapters of the volume.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

This brings us to the heart of the volume, the constructive third part. This part gives a complete account of the nature of atonement, drawing on the work of the previous chapters, especially with respect to the understanding of God's action in reconciliation reflected in the various models and motifs of atonement previously considered.

Chapter 7 sets the scene by considering the relationship between sin and atonement. The traditional claim that we are saved from sin by Christ's reconciling work needs some explanation. For what is sin and original sin, and how do they relate to Christ's atonement? Here I set out what I have elsewhere called a *moderate Reformed account* of original sin, or what Thomas McCall calls a "corruption-only" account.[8] On this way of thinking, we bear the corruption of human nature called original sin, but we do not bear original guilt. Rather, the state of sin with which we are generated inevitably gives rise to actual sin if we live long enough to commit such acts.

This leads into the first of two chapters on the nature of atonement and its consequences. Chapter 8 begins by rehearsing the iteration of the union account of atonement I previously published in *The Word Enfleshed*, an iteration that depends on a four-dimensionalist metaphysics to make sense of the relationship between Adam and Christ in reconciliation, as per the Adam Christology of Romans 5:12–19 and 1 Corinthians 15. This I call the *realist union account*. It is "realist" because, somehow, I am really a part of fallen humanity (which has Adam as its first member) and I am really a part of redeemed humanity (which has Christ as its first member). However, there are certain conceptual costs to that version of the argument. So the next part of the chapter is concerned to set out a revised version of the union account that does not depend on the four-dimensionalism I used in the realist version of the union account. Instead, I use some ideas from recent discussion of social ontology, especially group theory, to articulate an understanding of Christ's work as vicarious, reparative, penitential representation. We may call this the *representational union account*. Importantly, on my current understanding of these things, Christ's reconciling work is not a version of penal substitution. It is closer to satisfaction, though it is not exactly that either. Instead, Christ is accountable but not responsible for human sin, and he performs an act of vicarious penitence on behalf of fallen humanity that begins with his

8. See Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, chap. 7; and McCall, *Against God and Nature*.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

incarnation and culminates in his death and resurrection. In this way, it includes elements of an Anselmian way of thinking as well as elements of the vicarious penitence view espoused by the nineteenth-century Scottish pastor and theologian John McLeod Campbell.

Chapter 9 then takes up the issue of union with Christ consequent upon atonement. Because Christ's work makes it possible for all of humanity to be reconciled to God, a natural question arising from consideration of the mechanism of atonement is this: How can one be united to Christ so as to enjoy the benefits of his work? This can be done through the secret work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and union with Christ. Although traditionally regeneration is classed as dogmatically distinct from atonement, being a part of the order of salvation (*ordo salutis*), it is perhaps better thought of as a consequence of atonement within the broader category of soteriology. This chapter explores the notion of regeneration and union with Christ, set into the context of eternal justification. On this way of thinking, God eternally justifies the elect because of the reconciling work of Christ. This is actualized in time through the regenerating act of the Holy Spirit, who unites the believer to Christ on the basis of Christ's work of atonement. This precipitates the process of sanctification in which the believer becomes ever more like Christ in union with him by the Spirit, a process that goes on everlastingly. I adopt a broadly Edwardsian and supralapsarian understanding of these concepts, so that the believer is transformed by the infusion of the Holy Spirit in regeneration according to God's eternal purpose in salvation brought about by Christ in atonement.[9] This leads into a discussion of the way in which the believer is a member of the church, which is the mystical body of Christ. Thus, atonement theology and ecclesiology are intimately related.

Chapter 10 rounds out the whole with a synthesis chapter in which I draw the dogmatic threads of the foregoing together into one summary statement on the shape of soteriology, setting the question of the nature of atonement into the broader theological context of God's work of reconciliation in creation. In this way, those wishing to get a quick overview of the whole might turn to consult this final chapter as a capstone that expresses in short compass the overall shape of the work, set into this larger dogmatic context—a context that can properly be thought of as a species of theosis.

9. I discuss the question of supralapsarian Christology in Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, and regeneration in Crisp, "Regeneration Reconsidered."

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

PART 1

Approaching the Atonement

In approaching the doctrine of atonement it is important to give some sort of conceptual context. How should we think of this doctrine? Are there particular methodological issues that need to be addressed? Such matters are important, and it behooves us to begin by thinking about them. That is the task of part 1, which deals in successive chapters with general methodological issues of terminology and concepts (chapter 1), followed by a discussion of the value and necessity of atonement (chapter 2). This paves the way for part 2, where some influential models of atonement are discussed in more detail. Then, furnished with these methodological considerations and with some theological context for a discussion of atonement as a doctrine, part 3 takes up the constructive task of providing an account of atonement.

Throughout the work, the emphasis is on the historical, theological, and philosophical dimensions of the doctrine. The biblical traditions are discussed as they bear on particular issues, and they inform the argument that follows. But this is not primarily a work of biblical scholarship. My view is that theology is informed by the biblical *and post-biblical* traditions of Christianity, and that the Bible has a particular normative place

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

in making theological judgments.[1] Nevertheless, it is not the only norm in making such judgments, and in the case of atonement, what the Bible says is theologically underdeveloped. It is subsequent discussion of the reconciling work of Christ in the post-biblical theological tradition that has been more important in shaping the sort of views we have of the theology of atonement today. However, lest I be misunderstood, I am not suggesting that we should simply do our theology independent of Scripture and then impose it on the biblical data, or cherry-pick which passages we think will best fit our pet model of atonement. Rather, I am suggesting that the biblical traditions should *inform* the sort of constructive theological account we give of a particular doctrine. That seems appropriate, given the shape of historic Christianity, which looks to Scripture as the primary site where God continues to speak today. But in addition to this, I am also saying that Scripture does not give us a prepackaged doctrine of atonement that just needs to be unwrapped and assembled, much less a full-orbed understanding of the nature of atonement. Scripture is full of hints, intimations, motifs, metaphors, narratives—things from which doctrine can be fashioned, though it does not contain a ready-made account of the doctrine.

As we shall see in the first chapter, this is not as controversial as it at first seems. But it is important to point out at the beginning of a work like this because some readers may come looking for a particular kind of book, one that provides an account of "the biblical" view of atonement. Such readers will be disappointed because there is, in my view, no such thing as *the* biblical view of atonement. Rather, there are biblical building blocks that may be used for the construction of atonement doctrine. In a similar manner, there is no biblical view of the Trinity much less *the* biblical view of the Trinity—indeed, the word "Trinity" is not even in the Bible. But most theologians have thought that the Bible contains the conceptual building blocks needed to fashion a doctrine of the Trinity. Even then, there is not one biblical account of the Trinity: models proliferate, and they are often incommensurate with one another. At least with the Trinity we have a dogmatic framework to work with, provided by post-biblical tradition in the shape of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan symbol of AD 381. We have no such creedal framework for the discussion

1. I discuss this further in the context of Christology in the first chapter of Crisp, *God Incarnate*. See also, Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism*, chap. 1.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

of atonement. It is not surprising, then, that the biblical building blocks that have been used to make atonement doctrine have been assembled in different ways by different theologians down the centuries, yielding different and sometimes incommensurate ways of thinking about Christ's reconciling work.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

1

Methodological Issues

Contemporary works on the atonement are replete with language of doctrines, theories, models, metaphors, and motifs. Yet the consensus among modern theologians is that the New Testament does not offer a *single* explanation of Christ's atoning work. For instance, in the middle of the twentieth century the Scottish Presbyterian theologian Donald Baillie remarked, "If we take the Christology of the New Testament at its highest we can only say that 'God was in Christ' in that great atoning sacrifice, and even that the Priest and the Victim both were none other than God. There is in the New Testament no uniformity of conception as to *how* this sacrifice brings about the reconciliation."[1] Similarly, T. F. Torrance writes, "No explanation is ever given in the New Testament, or in the Old Testament, why atonement for sin involves the blood of sacrifice."[2] Some more recent theologians have argued that the search for models and theories of atonement is itself a forlorn enterprise. Instead, we should acknowledge that Scripture offers a number of motifs or metaphors but no single mechanism for atonement, such as one would

1. Baillie, *God Was in Christ*, 188. For a catena of modern theologians who say something similar to Baillie about the lack of an explanation for atonement in the New Testament, see Winter, *Atonement*, 30–37.

2. T. F. Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*, 114.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

expect in something more conceptually sophisticated, like a model or theory.[3] Still other contemporary theologians argue that the kaleidoscope of images for Christ's atonement in the New Testament should lead theologians to the conclusion that a plurality of models for atonement is mandated on the basis of Scripture. Thus, Joel Green writes, "The hermeneutical task that occupied Paul and Peter and other New Testament writers, and Christian theologians and preachers subsequently, is located at the interface of this central affirmation of the atoning work of Christ and its contingent interpretation. This continues to be the hermeneutical task today, and this explains not only the presence of but also the mandate for multiple models of understanding and communicating the cross of Christ."[4]

Not only is there no single explanation of the atonement in the Bible, the atonement is not a theological notion whose dogmatic shape is universally agreed upon in historic Christian thought either. It has no canonical definition, no creedal statement that gives it a particular shape beyond the idea that Christ's work reconciles human beings to God. Hence, different accounts of the atonement have proliferated in historic Christianity, and constructive theologians continue that tradition today, bringing forth from their treasure stores things old and new.[5]

This is not to say that there are no symbolic resources in the Christian tradition that might help give dogmatic shape to the atonement. Protestant confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* of the twentieth century provide some understanding of the reconciling work of Christ. But, unlike the two-natures doctrine of the ancient Christian church, the views expressed by these documents do not stem from some earlier understanding of the reconciling work of Christ that is universally agreed upon by Christians East and West, on the basis of what is found in the biblical traditions.

3. A good example of this is Colin Gunton's work, *Actuality of Atonement*. In his little book, Michael Winter criticizes modern theologians who agree that the New Testament offers no explanation of the atonement and yet "offer no explanation of it themselves to compensate for that omission" (*Atonement*, 30). While he documents many modern theologians who do appear to omit such explanation, some of the more recent work on atonement does, I think, attempt to address this issue.

4. J. Green, "Kaleidoscopic View," 171. See also Baker and J. Green, *Scandal of the Cross*.

5. In his recent work on divine action, Irish-American philosophical theologian William Abraham even goes as far as to celebrate the fact that this is the case, rather than treating it as a kind of theological embarrassment. See *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, 97.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

How should we then understand the views expressed in this symbolic material? For that matter, how should we understand the views expressed in historic theologians on this topic, or the views of contemporary divines as they develop their own ways of understanding the mediatorial work of Christ? Much depends on the status of such accounts. Are they the sober truth of the matter? An approximation to that truth? Merely metaphors or pictures that do not have any necessary connection to the way things actually are? In this opening chapter I will focus in on these methodological questions by attempting to clarify the scope of what might be called the dogmatic ambition of atonement theology. In other words, we shall consider what motifs and metaphors, doctrines, models, and theories of atonement amount to as an important methodological concern in approaching the atonement. This involves some attempt to give an orientation to these different concepts, as well as to offer some account of their interrelationship and of the way in which they function in some of the major views of the atonement.

To that end, this chapter offers one way of understanding motifs and metaphors, doctrines, models, and theories as applied to Christian theology in general, and to the atonement in particular. Having done that, we shall trace out the relationship between these different methodological concepts so as to provide some explanation of how they should function in approaching the atonement. A short concluding section considers the upshot of this discussion for the remainder of this book.[6]

Atonement and Reconciliation

Let us begin with the notion of reconciliation at the heart of traditional notions of the work of Christ. "Atonement" (at-one-ment) is the English word that expresses the concept of reconciliation, and that has passed into

6. Abraham maintains that the classical views of atonement "operate on a simple principle: pick out an image that fits the work of Christ and then upgrade it into a grand theory" (*Divine Agency and Divine Action*, 92). No doubt this reflects Abraham's penchant for pithy turns of phrase, but as the history of these discussions shows, it is surely a caricature. The language of atonement theology may not have received canonical definition, but it has been honed and discussed over centuries of theological reflection. Though particular accounts have developed, as we shall see in part 2 in more detail, and though these depend on particular motifs or images of Christ's reconciliation, it would be grossly unfair (I think) to reduce this to picking an image and beefing it up into a "grand theory."

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

English-language theological parlance. As the English Reformed theologian Colin Gunton once remarked, "*Atonement* is the portmanteau word used in English to denote the reconciliation between God and the world which is at the heart of Christian teaching."[7] That seems broadly correct, although for present purposes, a narrower working definition of atonement will be more serviceable, one that focuses on human beings and includes an indication of why reconciliation is needed. Thus, *atonement is the act of reconciliation between God and fallen human beings brought about by Christ*. According to Scripture, human beings are estranged from God because of sin. As Romans 3:23 puts it, "All [human beings] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Christ's atoning work brings about reconciliation with God by dealing with human sin, which is an obstacle to divine-human relationship. However, the atonement is not merely about the removal of obstacles to relationship with God but also about securing the goods accompanying a right relationship with God.[8] Nevertheless, this is a fundamental concern of atonement theology—in fact, to my way of thinking, the most fundamental concern. For without atonement for sin there can be no reconciliation with God for fallen human beings. Without atonement we are all "dead in our trespasses" (Rom. 5:6; Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:13). We might say that, at a bare minimum, any theologically adequate account of the atonement must assume that the atonement is the act of reconciliation between God and fallen human beings brought about by Christ. In what follows we shall assume this way of thinking about the atonement as a point of departure.[9] With this in mind, let us turn to consider some key terms in atonement theology.

7. Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement*, 2 (emphasis original).

8. Thus, William Lane Craig is right, in my judgment, to say that atonement in the *narrow sense* of being cleansed of sin achieves atonement in the *broader sense* of reconciliation with God (see Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ*, 3). But that is not all that the atonement brings about—as the recent work of Eleonore Stump has reminded us (see Stump, *Atonement*). It is not enough for obstacles to reconciliation to be removed; we must be placed in a reconciled state. Craig thinks this conflates atonement and the order of salvation. But that is to make a particular theological judgment about the shape of atonement doctrine. It is not obvious that this is the *only* way, or even the *right* way, to characterize atonement. And, to my mind, Stump is right to suggest that atonement must be about being placed in right relationship with God, not merely about the possibility of such reconciliation. Atonement must be *effectual* if it is really about at-one-ment.

9. A similar point is made by William Abraham. He proposes that "we return to the core, root meaning" of atonement: "the righting of relationship between estranged persons." As he says, "Atonement is fundamentally concerned with the repair of broken relationships" (Abraham,

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

a. Motifs and Metaphors

Motifs and metaphors play an important—indeed, indispensable—role in atonement theology. Biblical metaphors abound: Christ is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the shepherd who dies for his sheep, the high priest who enters the holy of holies on our behalf, and so on. Motifs are often metaphors with staying power, for they are recurring. Christ as the lamb of God, as the pascal lamb, as the sacrificial lamb, and so on are examples of such a biblical motif, which is also metaphorical in nature. But in principle motifs may simply be recurring themes or ideas that are not necessarily or fundamentally metaphorical in nature, such as leitmotifs that appear and then recur with variations in a piece of orchestral music. In atonement theology motifs like sacrifice, substitute, satisfaction, ransom, and so on are important features of particular accounts of the reconciling work of Christ. Metaphors often provide important building blocks. Take the notion of the lamb of God being offered up as a sacrifice on our behalf. This is clearly a metaphor and a biblical motif that characterizes Christ's saving work. But it may also become (and has become) a stepping-stone toward more complex ways of thinking about the work of Christ that have at their heart the notion that Christ somehow offers himself up as a vicarious sacrifice for our sins—a theological element that can be found in several different historic and contemporary accounts of the atonement (such as satisfaction and penal substitution).[10] In recent theology there is a tendency to speak of different approaches to the doctrine of atonement as representing different metaphors—as if Christ's reconciling work as a ransom, a satisfaction for sin, a penal substitution, a moral example, or whatever, constitutes a picture or a representation or a symbol that stands in for something else. Of course, these are pictures of the atonement, but (as we shall see) doctrines and models of the atonement are more than just metaphors, though they include metaphors as elements of larger conceptual wholes. Doctrine in Christian theology, as Christine Helmer reminds us, "is said to be concerned with the truth of the eternal

Divine Agency and Divine Action, 86). This seems spot-on to me. All other language of atonement depends on this core claim about reconciliation with God.

10. For instance, Richard Swinburne's penetrating account of the atonement as a sacrifice is really an updated version of a satisfaction doctrine, indebted more to Thomas Aquinas than to Anselm. See Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement*.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

God." It "recognizes God as its source; and like Sacred Scripture, doctrine contains the knowledge that God has revealed about [the] divine nature and about the divine perspective on self and world. . . . Stripped of the accretions that human traditions and interpretations have added to it, doctrine is synonymous with the truth of the gospel."[11] But if that is right, then doctrines, and by extension, models that attempt to offer some explanatory framework for making sense of the atonement, cannot be merely metaphors. For they include, on this way of thinking, irreducibly propositional components.

Getting a clearer idea of the role played by motifs and metaphors in accounts of atonement is important for another reason as well. It helps us to see whether views proposed as particular doctrines or models or theories of atonement actually pass muster. For instance, the ransom view of atonement has recently become a popular option for theologians who are troubled by some of the language and content of other traditional models of Christ's reconciling work, particularly satisfaction and penal substitution. But it is not clear on examination that the ransom view actually amounts to a doctrine or model of atonement. As I will argue in chapter 4, it seems that it is more like a motif or metaphor, for it does not provide a clear mechanism of atonement.

This is only underlined by the fact that, in recent discussion of the ransom view, the notion of *Christus Victor* (Christ the victor), which had previously been regarded as a synonym for ransom, has been decoupled from it. Now there are ransom views and, alternatively, *Christus Victor* views in which Christ's victory is not regarded as part of any act that ransoms fallen human beings. Thus Denny Weaver in *The Nonviolent Atonement* can say, "What this book has called narrative Christus Victor thus finally becomes a reading of the history of God's people, who make God's rule visible in the world by the confrontation of injustice and by making visible in their midst the justice, peace, and freedom of the rule of God. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus constitute the culmination of that rule of God, and also the particular point in history when God's rule is most fully present and revealed."[12] Later he adds, "Since Jesus' mission was not to die but to make visible the reign of God, it is quite explicit that neither God nor the reign of God needs Jesus' death in the

11. Helmer, *End of Doctrine*, 23.
12. Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 84–85.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

way that his death is irreducibly needed in satisfaction theory."[13] These are significant admissions, and they say something about the way in which one family of metaphors having to do with Christ's work being a ransom can fund distinct approaches to the doctrine of atonement.

b. Doctrines

By the term "doctrine" I mean (minimally) a comprehensive account of a particular teaching about a given theological topic held by some community of Christians or some particular denomination. So, on this way of thinking, a doctrine of the atonement is an account[14] of the atonement that has been taught by a particular group of Christians such as Baptists, Anglicans, Mennonites, Orthodox, and so on. A doctrine is a comprehensive account of a given teaching because it is a complete, theological whole that forms part of what we might call the conceptual fabric of the life of the particular ecclesial community. Doctrines are not normally partial, piecemeal, or ad hoc notions that are thrown together. Rather, a doctrine used in this sense is a conceptual whole that usually develops over time, often in the fires of controversy. This process of doctrinal development is ongoing, even where a doctrine has a stable canonical form. For such doctrines are still the subject of dogmatic scrutiny, revision, and reassessment in light of new insights, new arguments, and, sometimes, new data.

Perhaps the preeminent example of this is the doctrine of the Trinity, which developed from an early devotion to Christ alongside Jewish monotheism into the central and defining theological doctrine of Christianity through the vituperative ecclesiastical struggle that eventually produced the Nicene Creed of AD 381. Unlike the Trinity, the atonement is a doctrine that has no undisputed canonical shape, though it does take on particular forms in certain ecclesiastical contexts, such as the notion of vicarious satisfaction beloved of historic Presbyterians.[15] Doctrines like the Trinity

13. Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 89. I take these matters up in more detail in chapter 4.

14. Throughout this chapter I use the term "account" as a placeholder that ranges over metaphors and motifs, doctrines, and models of atonement—rather like the term "attribute," in discussions of the divine nature, is a placeholder and can mean "property," "predicate," and so on.

15. See the Westminster Confession (8.5): "The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself, which he through the eternal Spirit once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father; and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto him."

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

that have such a canonical form are typically part of the conceptual core of the faith. For this reason they are sometimes referred to as "dogmas."[16] So dogmas are a particular kind of doctrine that have a definite canonical shape. All dogmas are doctrines, but not all doctrines are dogmas, for some doctrines lack a canonical shape, such as the atonement. It will be helpful for our purposes to observe this distinction. However, even if a doctrine has a canonical form—that is, it is a dogma like the Trinity—which acts as a kind of theological constraint on how it is understood, this does not prevent there from being different ways of making sense of a given dogma consistent with its basic canonical shape. Thus historic Christianity has taken the Nicene Creed as the point of departure for thinking about the Trinity. Yet today there are a number of different accounts of the Trinity consistent with the dogmatic shape of the Nicene position, yielding distinct models that (in some cases at least) are incommensurate in important respects, such as social, psychological or Latin, and constitution models of the Trinity.[17]

It may be objected that the characterization of doctrine as a comprehensive account of a particular teaching about a given theological topic held by some community of Christians, or some particular denomination, is ambiguous in at least two important respects. First, it is ambiguous about the nature of Christian doctrine—that is, about what Christian doctrines like the atonement are supposed to be. Second, it is ambiguous about the dogmatic substance of Christian doctrine—that is, about what Christian doctrines like the atonement are supposed to convey. Let us consider these two sorts of ambiguity in turn.

First, the characterization of doctrine offered here is consistent with one of several ways of thinking about the nature of Christian doctrine. For instance, it is commensurate with the idea that the doctrines of Christian theology are in large measure regulative, providing a grammar for theology that may or may not correspond to some state of affairs beyond

16. Some Protestants may balk at this distinction between dogma and doctrine. But I think it captures an important difference between those doctrines that have canonical form (i.e., some sort of settled shape agreed upon and promulgated in catholic creeds; the incarnation and the Trinity are prime examples) and those that do not (like the atonement). It is possible for a doctrine to be at the heart of the Christian faith and yet lack a clear, canonical form. The atonement is the paradigm of this.

17. For detailed recent essays that deal with each of these trinitarian models, see McCall and Rea, *Philosophical and Theological Essays*. I have discussed them in more detail in Crisp, *Analyzing Doctrine*, chap. 4.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

the doctrinal matrix (as postliberal theologians aver). In a similar fashion, the rules of a game such as chess regulate play but do not (necessarily) correspond to a state of affairs beyond the game. Alternatively, it could be that doctrine has more than a merely regulative function. Perhaps (as was intimated earlier in connection with Christine Helmer's work) it also has a propositional function, as much of historic Christianity has presumed. On this way of thinking, doctrines are statements that express concepts that are truth-apt and truth-aimed. A third option is that doctrine has a largely symbolic value. As George Lindbeck puts it, on this view, doctrines are experiential-expressivist in nature; they function "as non-informative and non-discursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations."[18] This third option is a much more radically subjective way of thinking about the nature of doctrine, but one that would be consistent with the idea that Christian doctrine is concerned to provide a comprehensive account of a particular teaching about a given theological topic held by some community of Christians, or some particular denomination.

In attempting to give an account of how different approaches to Christ's reconciling work function as Christian doctrine, it is important not to preclude certain live options at the outset. The three live options of Lindbeck's treatment of the nature of doctrine are three ways in which our working definition of doctrine could be construed,[19] though perhaps not the only three ways in which the definition could be construed.[20] My own view is that doctrine is conceptual and propositional in nature, which I take to be the way in which doctrine has been understood in much, though by no means all, of the Christian tradition. But the way I have characterized doctrine here does not require that it be understood in this way.

This brings us to the second ambiguity in the characterization of doctrine, which has to do with the material content, or substance, of doctrine. I have deliberately tried to provide what seems to me to be a *dogmatically minimalist* way of framing Christian doctrine. It seems to me that such

18. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 16.

19. That is, the regulative view, the propositional view, and the subjective and symbolic view mentioned previously. These are the three live options around which Lindbeck structures his discussion of doctrine in *The Nature of Doctrine*.

20. For instance, in *The End of Doctrine*, Helmer suggests a rather different account of doctrine that takes Lindbeck as a point of departure.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

dogmatic minimalism is a theological virtue rather than a vice. Think of the Trinity once more. If any central theological concept is dogmatically minimalist in nature, the Trinity is. For in its Nicene form it provides a canonical shape and constraint on what Christians should believe about the divine nature, yet without necessarily committing the believer to a particular way of understanding key notions that comprise fundamental elements of the doctrine, such as “person” and “nature/essence.” Something similar is true of the atonement—yet with the vital difference that, unlike the Trinity, the atonement has no definite canonical shape. To use our earlier distinction, it is a doctrine not a dogma.

I have said that the atonement is the act of reconciliation between God and fallen human beings brought about by Christ. I take it that this, or something very much like it, is a kind of dogmatic minimum that all, or almost all, Christians can agree upon. More would need to be said to flesh this out in order to provide a comprehensive account that would constitute a doctrine of atonement. The provision of this additional material can usually be found by appealing to confessions, catechisms, and writings of theologians of particular ecclesiastical persuasions belonging to particular Christian traditions and communions. But even here the results are often dogmatically thin, and (so it seems to me) deliberately so, committing adherents to what seems to be nonnegotiable while leaving certain matters ambiguous or underdeveloped.

For instance, Article 31 of the Anglican *Articles of Religion* states, “The Offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone.” Here is a doctrine of atonement. It certainly expresses the notion that the atonement is the act of reconciliation between God and fallen human beings brought about by Christ. But it construes this in a particular way: as a propitiation (i.e., a way of appeasing God), and a satisfaction. These are two theologically loaded terms. Propitiation focuses our attention upon the manner in which Christ’s work brings about reconciliation, and satisfaction provides us with a mechanism by means of which this goal is achieved. But this is also underdeveloped. Much more would need to be said about the role of propitiation and satisfaction, and what is meant by satisfaction in particular, in order for us to have a full-orbed account of the atonement. This requires some model of atonement—most likely

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

some version of the satisfaction view or some version of penal substitution.[21] So, although the *Articles of Religion* appear to commit Anglicans to a particular range or family of views on the reconciling work of Christ (either satisfaction or penal substitution, or something very similar to these views), it is also sufficiently dogmatically thin, so to speak, as to leave open a number of issues that require further development in order to provide a full-orbed understanding of the atonement. And this is usually provided by a model of atonement.

c. Models[22]

At first glance models of atonement have certain apparently paradoxical qualities. On the one hand, such models thicken up the dogmatic minimalism of atonement doctrines, expanding such doctrines, so to speak, so as to provide a fuller explanation of the nature of the atonement and, in particular, the mechanism of atonement. On the other hand, models of atonement do not necessarily attempt to provide a complete or comprehensive view of Christ's reconciling work. Rather, they offer a simplified description of the complex reality that is the work of Christ, which gives particular attention to the nature of that work and its effectiveness in terms of human reconciliation with God.

This apparent tension can be resolved by distinguishing between the conceptual goals of doctrines and models of atonement and their dogmatic function. The conceptual goal of doctrine is to provide a comprehensive account of a particular teaching about a given theological topic held by some community of Christians or some particular denomination. But usually this is dogmatically minimalist in nature. Something can be both conceptually wide-reaching in its scope and yet rather thin in the information it provides, like a map of the world. Such maps function to provide us with general information about the world, such as the shape of its continents

21. A number of Reformation and post-Reformation Protestant theologians speak in terms of a vicarious satisfaction although, upon examination, their views are actually species of penal substitution. So it seems that the contemporary popular conflation of satisfaction and penal substitution has some basis in the unfortunate way in which historic accounts of penal substitution are often described, by its defenders, as vicarious satisfaction. A good example of this can be found in Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*—one of the most sophisticated products of the period of Protestant Orthodoxy.

22. I have dealt with doctrinal models elsewhere. See *Analyzing Doctrine*; and "The Importance of Model-Building," 9–20.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

and seas and the political divisions of different countries. The conceptual goal of a model of atonement is more narrowly focused than that of a doctrine, and a model aims to be conceptually thicker. It is like a road map of the United States, which is limited to one geographical region but gives more information about that region than a map of the world does. What we might call the "dogmatic function" of a road map of the United States is also different from that of a map of the world in that the former provides much more detailed information about how to get about the particular geographical region it represents as well as information about the size of the towns and cities of the region. In a similar way, doctrines of atonement are conceptually broad and thin, whereas models of atonement are narrower and conceptually thicker. Also like the road map, models of atonement do not give comprehensive information but are by their very nature selective in what they convey.

Consider the notion of model utilized in much contemporary scientific literature, which has been appropriated in the science and religion literature as well. A model in this connection offers a coherent simplified description of a more complex reality. It attempts to "save the phenomena," but it does not attempt to give a complete description. As Ian Barbour puts it, "Models and theories are abstract symbol systems, which inadequately and selectively represent particular aspects of the world for specific purposes. This view preserves the scientist's realistic intent while recognizing that models and theories are imaginative human constructs. Models, on this reading, are to be taken seriously but not literally; they are neither literal pictures nor useful fictions but limited and inadequate ways of imagining what is not observable. They make tentative ontological claims that there are entities in the world something like those postulated in the models."[23]

This conception of models can be very helpful when attempting to provide a comprehensive picture of a particular data set that would otherwise be too complex to be rendered into a whole that is easily comprehended. (The diagram of an atom, familiar to any high school student of physics, is a good example of a model in this regard.) Applied to models of atonement, we can say this: such models are pictures of the reconciling work of Christ, its nature, and its effectiveness, which do not necessarily

23. Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 115.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

claim to offer a complete account of this aspect of Christ's work. Rather, they provide simplified descriptions of a particular data set that would otherwise be too complex to be rendered into a whole that is immediately comprehensible. Although not everyone working on the atonement in recent years would think of atonement models in this way, the language of much of this discussion reflects the intuition that no single approach to the atonement can hope to offer a comprehensive account of it. The attempt to make sense of the atonement in terms of models also reflects the epistemic fallibilism that can be found in much recent work on the atonement. In this context fallibilism is the notion that a particular belief or view—in this case, a belief about or view of the atonement—is partial, and does not (perhaps, cannot) adequately reflect the whole truth of the matter. Such beliefs or views are said to be epistemically fragile and dubitable. For these reasons they should be held tentatively.

Furthermore, Barbour's comments about models in a scientific context also indicate something else that is important to flag in the appropriation of such language for atonement theology. This is whether models of atonement should be understood to be *realist* in nature—that is, reflecting, and expressing in some manner, even if only partially and fallibly, a mind-independent truth of the matter.

Models of atonement could be regarded as instrumentalist rather than realist in nature. Instrumentalism in the philosophy of science is the notion that a particular scientific concept or theory is important because it has some heuristic value—because it is a useful way of organizing certain data, not because it is literally true or false. Applied to theology, we can say that an instrumentalist view of models of atonement (or any other Christian doctrine) conceives of the value of such models as primarily heuristic. The question of truth-aptness, or the extent to which a given atonement model expresses or captures some facet of the truth of the matter, is not salient on this view. However, lest we misunderstand instrumentalism, it is important to see that an instrumentalist view of models of atonement is consistent with there being some truth in the matter. It is just that the instrumentalist is not concerned with questions of truth as such; only with questions of use, function, and application.

Alternatively, models of the atonement could be thought of in terms of theological realism. On this view, although they may only approximate the truth of the matter, atonement models are nevertheless truth-apt and

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

aimed at truth. That is, they are aimed at the explanation or partial explanation of some truth of the matter regarding the atonement—a truth that is mind-independent.[24] The assumption in such models is that there is some truth to be had about the reconciling work of Christ. Accounts of the atonement are not just metaphor all the way down, so to speak, though they may contain metaphorical elements. Nor are they entirely socially constructed, being merely the product of human imagination. Nevertheless, even a theological realist must concede that models as applied to approaches to the atonement can only be approximations to the truth of the matter much as, in a Physics 101 textbook, the depiction of a model atom is only an approximation of the truth of the matter. It is understood that if we were able to see an atom, it would not actually look like the picture in the textbook. There is theological precedent for such reasoning to which we can appeal as well. For in a similar manner, theologians enamored of classical theism often write about the properties of God such as omnipotence or immutability, though, in point of fact, their commitment to a doctrine of divine simplicity entails the denial of any composition in God, including distinct divine properties.

In addition to instrumentalist and realist ways of thinking about models, and atonement models in particular, there are ways of thinking about the atonement, and models of the atonement, that are antirealist in nature. Such accounts decouple the doctrinal content of a given model of atonement from the ambition to give an account of this doctrine that is aimed at truth. A given doctrine or model of atonement may still be a useful fiction on this way of thinking, just as the rising of the sun and its setting are useful fictions from a human point of view. (Strictly speaking, the sun neither "rises" nor "sets," though these metaphors are deeply ingrained in the English language and shape many of the ways in which English speakers relate to our solar neighbor.) According to antirealist accounts of atonement, doctrines and models of the work of Christ are not aimed at truth. They are aimed at something else: eliciting within us a certain disposition or particular response. In a similar fashion, when a narrator begins speaking to an audience with the phrase "Once upon a time," we are habituated to expect what follows to be a fiction of some kind. In the right circumstances, the uttering of such a phrase elicits in us a certain

24. Or, at least, independent of any *creaturely* mind.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

disposition and a particular response. It is not the same response as would be had if the narrator had begun with the phrase "This is an update on our breaking news story." In the latter case we expect there to be a connection between what is being said and some truth of the matter, for we expect that the reporting of current affairs at least has the ambition of being truth-aimed. We do not have the same expectation in the case of the telling of a fairy tale.

Although it is possible to approach the atonement and atonement models in an antirealist manner, it seems fairly clear that the vast majority of historic accounts of the atonement have presumed some sort of realism about the atonement. Even if the language of atonement models is not present in much of the historic discussion of this doctrine, it is, I think, fairly safe to assume that theologians attracted to the historic assumption that Christian doctrine is realist in nature will be sympathetic to the idea that some sort of chastened realism applies also to atonement models. By *chastened realism* I mean a realism that makes allowances for things like fallibilism and social context, as well as for the fact that models are, on this way of thinking, only ever approximations to the truth of the matter.[25]

It seems that metaphors are important features of models, as they are important features of doctrine. Yet they are not the whole of a doctrine any more than they are the whole of a model. When the apostle Paul speaks of the church as a body with many parts in 1 Corinthians 12, this is not a model of the church; it is a metaphor. Such metaphors may be used to provide a model of the church as something that is, in many respects, organic and composite, as can be found in the work of a number of historic theologians, which in the Reformed tradition include such luminaries as

25. However, some modern theological treatments of models as applied to theology have argued that they are, in fact, no more than metaphors. For example, Sally McFague writes that "a model is, in essence, a sustained and systematic metaphor" (*Metaphorical Theology*, 67). However, it seems to me doubtful that models are just metaphors writ large. And, upon examination, it is not clear that McFague's position is entirely consistent on this matter. Later in her work she writes that "models are the hypotheses of structure or set of relations we project from an area we know reasonably well in order to give intelligibility to a similar structure we sense in a less-familiar area" (*Metaphorical Theology*, 76). But how are "hypotheses of structure," or "sets of relations," constitutive of metaphors given her claim that models are essentially metaphorical in nature? At the very least, it seems that the reader requires some explanation of how these apparently nonmetaphorical notions feature as parts of models that are supposed to be essentially metaphorical in nature.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

John Williamson Nevin.[26] But this involves laying out a conceptual framework for thinking about the nature of the church that a metaphor alone cannot provide. It is just such a conceptual framework that McFague seems to be hinting at in her use of terms like hypotheses, structures, and sets of relations.[27]

d. Theories

What, then, of *theories* of atonement? Here, as with our account of models, we turn to consider the way in which theories function in scientific work, and we apply that to theology. Like models, theories may offer generalized accounts of a great deal of complex information, which may be simplified using concepts independent of the data (e.g., concepts like incarnation or Trinity, neither of which are to be found in the New Testament). Unlike models, theories do not necessarily correlate to facts. Theories can be used to provide an explanation of counterfactual states of affairs. For instance, one might have a theory about what would happen to a particular population if it were exposed to a deadly virus: "*If* the population were exposed to this virus, *then* the following state of affairs would obtain"; or "*Were* the population exposed to this virus, then the following state of affairs *would have* obtained." Typically, theories of atonement are not counterfactual in this sense. They are not deployed in order to provide explanations of what would have happened had Jesus done something else. Instead, they are used to offer some explanation of what we should believe about what did, in fact, obtain in the case of his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, as witnessed to by the writers of the canonical Gospels. Also, a theory can itself be complex. It need not be a picture that simplifies the data. What is more, it may be used to offer a complete account of a given data set. In this respect theories may be more metaphysically ambitious in scope than models—think, for example, of Einstein's general theory of relativity in physics.

26. See Crisp, "John Williamson Nevin on the Church"; and the overview of W. B. Evans in *A Companion to the Mercersburg Theology*.

27. Khaled Anatolios is skeptical of the language of models in atonement theology. He writes that those who adopt such language "often fail even to consider such basic questions as what formally constitutes a 'model,' what materially these specific models are, and how many of them there are" (*Deification through the Cross*, 7). I hope that the remarks given here put paid to at least some of these concerns.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

The language of atonement theories is now commonplace, though this is actually a development that doesn't reflect patristic, medieval, or early modern usage any more than language about models of atonement do.[28] Nevertheless, I suggest that most theologians engaged in the project of providing some doctrinal explanation of the work of Christ as an atonement are attempting to give a model of atonement that they find compelling. They are not actually engaged in providing a theory of atonement. Often the model in question is offered as one, but only one, among several possible models. Some authors do go beyond this to delineate something more like theories of atonement—that is, they attempt to give not just one compelling (and approximate) picture of the work of Christ but also to provide reasons for thinking that the account they set forth is preferable to, or more comprehensive than, competing views. There are also those who have offered what might be called "meta-models," or theories about models of atonement. That is, they hazard a theory that explains why there is a plethora of different, and apparently mutually exclusive, models of the atonement. This is how I understand the kaleidoscopic account of the atonement favored by Mark Baker and Joel Green.[29]

The Relationship between Motifs, Metaphors, Doctrines, Models, and Theories

Having set out the distinction between motifs and metaphors, doctrines, models, and theories of atonement, we may now step back and consider the theological relationship between these different notions. I have argued that the atonement is the act of reconciliation between God and fallen human beings brought about by Christ. Motifs and metaphors of atonement are

28. This point has been made elsewhere in the recent literature. See, for example, A. Johnson, *Atonement: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 28. Nineteenth-century theologians like Schleiermacher, Charles Hodge, and John Miley write of "theories" of atonement, not models (see, e.g., Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 460; Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, part 3, chap. 9; and Miley, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, chap. 4). But it seems that they mean by theories of atonement what I am calling models of atonement. The classification offered here more closely follows current language of models and theories in the current scientific literature than it does nineteenth-century theological usage. In contemporary atonement theology, Craig is an example of someone who still uses the language of "atonement theory" (see Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ*).

29. See Baker and Green, *Scandal of the Cross*. I have discussed this view in more detail in Crisp, *Approaching the Atonement*, chap. 9.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

elements that may compose aspects of a doctrine or model of atonement. However, they are not doctrines or models of atonement as such, any more than, say, an illustration is a sermon, or a denouement is a story. It may be that some accounts of atonement that are often thought to be doctrines or models do not, in fact, rise above motifs of metaphors for atonement (e.g., many *Christus Victor*/ransom views).

Doctrines and models of atonement are more than motifs or metaphors. A doctrine of atonement is a comprehensive account of the reconciling work of Christ held by some community of Christians or some particular denomination. Such a comprehensive account will include some mechanism of atonement, unlike motifs and metaphors. Doctrines are also often dogmatically minimalist in nature.

To my way of thinking, models of atonement are in one respect less comprehensive than doctrines of atonement (because of a difference in conceptual goals), though in another respect they usually offer more by way of explanation of the nature of atonement (because of a difference in dogmatic function). By definition they are attempts to give an approximation to the truth of the matter, a simplified picture of more complex data, such as can be found in Scripture, creeds, confessions, and the work of particular theologians. Still, a model, like a doctrine, provides a mechanism for atonement—it does have ambitions to give some explanation of the reconciling work of Christ, even if models do not offer complete explanations as such. It is also the case that models are often the products of individual theologians, whose particular opinions and arguments are offered up as contributions to the furtherance of our understanding of the atonement, as it is understood in particular communities and by particular churches. So, models are narrower in scope than doctrines of atonement. Classic atonement models, on this way of thinking, include satisfaction, penal substitution, the governmental view, the vicarious humanity view of John McLeod Campbell, some versions of the moral exemplar view, and, perhaps, some of the patristic accounts of atonement such as those provided by Athanasius and Irenaeus.[30]

What is more, models in atonement theology often specify more detail by way of explanation of the mechanism of atonement than some doctrines of atonement. Earlier, we saw that this was the case with the

30. I give an account of these different views in *Approaching the Atonement*.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

dogma of the Trinity, which has a canonical form that is what I have called dogmatically minimalist. Models of the Trinity are attempts to spell out that canonical form more explicitly, offering particular ways of thinking about the doctrine that fill in the metaphysical gaps, so to speak, so as to provide a fuller or richer understanding of the nature of the Trinity. This is true of the atonement as well.

Our earlier example of the Westminster Confession will make the point here. Recall that the Westminster Confession (8.5) says, "The Lord Jesus, by His perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself, which he through the eternal Spirit once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father; and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto him." But here, as with the Anglican *Articles of Religion*, there is a certain dogmatic minimalism at work. It is possible to construct one of several models of the atonement on the basis of what is affirmed in this passage. Taking it as a kind of dogmatic constraint, which provides a theological framework for thinking about the atonement, a model could be provided that explained what divine justice consists in, how Christ satisfies divine justice, and how this act of satisfaction purchases everlasting life for a specific number of fallen humanity. But clearly, there is more than one way to think about each of these constituent parts of the doctrine, which would generate more than one model of atonement. For instance: How is satisfaction related to divine justice? How does Christ's work provide a satisfaction? What about Christ's work is a satisfaction? Does this include all the elements of Christ's life or only his work on the cross? And so on. From this it seems clear that there is an important difference between models and doctrines, and that models are more modest in their explanatory ambitions than doctrines, but often more detailed in the metaphysical stories they provide in order to make sense of the doctrinal claims they seek to explain.

Theories of atonement are more comprehensive than either doctrines or models. Of the current accounts of the atonement, one seems to fit this category particularly well, and that is the kaleidoscopic view of Mark Baker and Joel Green. The idea here is to provide a theory about how we should think about different models of the atonement relative to one another and to the doctrine of atonement. Baker and Green do not put matters in this way. Nevertheless, on the classification offered here

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

it would be appropriate to think of their account in these terms rather than as another model or doctrine of atonement because they claim to be offering a way of understanding all the existing models of atonement as partial metaphorical windows onto some larger whole. This is not so much another model as a meta-model or a theory about how to regard extant models of atonement, one that also takes into consideration other relevant factors like social location and epistemic purview.

The Upshot

What can be learned from this methodological reflection on some of the key terms and concepts that inform a discussion about the atonement? First, such engagement helps to get clearer the theological ambition of different doctrines of atonement. Second, this sort of work raises important questions about the scope of atonement theology—what can such reflection actually achieve, theologically speaking, if there is no universally agreed upon doctrinal core to the reconciling work of Christ? Third, there is a question about how we characterize different accounts of atonement. Since the 1930s and the work of Gustaf Aulén,[31] it has been common to classify atonement doctrines into a threefold typology. If our analysis is on target, this seems far too simplistic as a way of demarcating the differences that exist between different ways of conceiving the saving work of Christ. Not only does this flatten out the differences between particular doctrines; it distorts the nature of the differences that exist between the different historic approaches to this matter. For if some of these approaches are mere motifs or metaphors, and others are doctrines or models that set out a mechanism for atonement, while still others are more like theories about atonement models, then what we have is not a typology of different doctrines of atonement. Instead, we have different levels of theological explanation regarding the atonement. Motifs and metaphors are partial pictures or windows into the doctrine; doctrines are more complex wholes that have motifs and metaphors as constituent elements; models are more narrow but conceptually richer attempts to provide a particular way of understanding the reconciling work of Christ; and theories about atonement models offer a way of thinking

31. Aulén, *Christus Victor*.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.

about these different doctrines relative to particular cultural and contextual hermeneutical concerns that shape the particular accounts of the work of Christ.

With these general methodological considerations in mind, we may turn next to the question of the value and necessity of the atonement.

Oliver D. Crisp, Participation and Atonement
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022
Used by permission.