

Is Ransom Enough?

Oliver D. Crisp
Fuller Theological Seminary

Abstract: In recent systematic theology versions of the Ransom account of the atonement have proliferated. Much of this work uses Gustav Aulén's *Christus Victor* as a point of departure. In this paper I first distinguish between models and theories of atonement. Then I discuss three recent theological perorations of the Ransom model as a prelude to setting out four interpretive strategies for understanding this view of atonement. I then offer some critical remarks on these strategies, concluding that the Ransom view as set forth here does not provide a complete model of atonement.

Gustav Aulén closes his famous study of the atonement with these remarks about what he calls the “classic” account of the doctrine—what I take to be a version of the ransom model of atonement:

I have tried to be consistent in speaking of the classic *idea* of the Atonement, never of the, or a, classic *theory*; I have reserved the word *theory*, and usually the word *doctrine*, for the Latin and ‘subjective’ types [of doctrines of atonement]. For the classic idea of the Atonement has never been put forward, like the other two, as a rounded and finished theological *doctrine*; it has always been an idea, a *motif*, a theme, expressed in many different variations. It is not, indeed, that it has lacked clearness of outline; on the contrary, it has been fully definite and unambiguous. But it has never been shaped into a rational theory (1931, 174-175).

I presume that he has in mind something like the following rough-and-ready distinction. An idea of atonement is a concept or notion that captures some central thought about a particular way of thinking about the atonement that has not been developed into a model. We might think of such atonement ideas as motifs or pictures, that is, conceptual windows that offer a partial view into some larger whole. I suppose that a model of atonement is a simplified description of the complex data of Scripture and the Christian tradition that bear upon this topic, on analogy with scientific models. Such models approximate the truth of the matter, and offer a more expansive view of the larger whole. Thus, Ian Barbour, in commenting on the use of models in the scientific literature writes,

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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 (1997, 115).¹

Something similar could be said about atonement models, *mutatis mutandis*. But I would want to add this caveat: A theory is potentially more comprehensive than a model, being a system of ideas or a conceptual framework that makes sense of a lot of data in some overarching account of an area of intellectual endeavor. For this reason, theories are often thought to be more generalized than models, with the latter informing theories but being insufficient to generate a theory, whilst theories may have particular applications in models of certain data sets.

Often in the theological literature on soteriology one reads of *theories* of atonement, but on this way of thinking it may be that "model" is the more accurate term. For we are trying to give a simplified description of complex data, and it may be that more than one model is required to do so. (Of course, one might have a theory about models of atonement, and there are such theories in the literature as well.²) Moreover, if, as is often claimed in contemporary work on the atonement, no one account of the atonement exhausts what can be said about the doctrine, it may be that the attempt to find an overarching theory of atonement by means of which to understand all the different data on the topic is a forlorn one. The search for a particular model that may approximate the truth of the matter is, on this way of thinking, a more modest quest and, perhaps because of this, one more likely to succeed.

What then of *doctrines* of atonement? In Christian theology a doctrine is (minimally) a comprehensive account of a particular theological topic held by a particular communion. In his discussion of the nature of doctrine George Lindbeck adds to this the notion that church doctrines are also essential to the identity or welfare of a particular community (1984, 74). But I think that is too stringent in the case of atonement: although some account of atonement certainly is essential to the Christian faith, it is not clear to me that particular doctrines of atonement—

¹ Barbour's view is a species of critical realism, the doctrine according to which theories about the world give rise to imaginative models that can be used to test certain aspects of theories in light of experimental procedures, refining the model (and sometimes the theory) in the process. Such a view presumes that there is a world independent of the human knower which may be the proper subject of such investigation, whilst acknowledging that our conceptual and theoretical grasp of the world may be tentative, or in need of revision or enrichment. That seems broadly right to me.

² For instance, Joel Green and Mark Baker's kaleidoscope theory about atonement models. See Green and Baker (2011), and Joel Green's (2006) contribution to James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds. *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*.

particular construals of that central notion, as it were—are essential to particular communities. For the atonement does not have a dogmatic definition in many Christian traditions.

In my view, doctrines provide propositional content to Christian claims about particular theological topics—claims that are truth-apt. That is, doctrines are aimed at truth; they presume there is a truth of the matter and attempt to express that in propositional form.³ Normally speaking, a doctrine of atonement implies a particular model for understanding this aspect of Christian teaching. Hence, we might say that St Anselm’s understanding of the doctrine of atonement implies a particular way of conceiving atonement, which can be expressed in a model for understanding the work of Christ, namely, satisfaction.

Aulén doesn’t go into great detail about the difference between his use of “idea” and “doctrine” and so forth, but I think that what I have said here is consistent with the views he does state, and captures his worry that an idea of atonement is much more provisional, and incomplete, than a doctrine of atonement. For an idea of atonement may provide a motif or picture of Christ’s work without giving a worked out mechanism by means of which atonement takes place—which is just to say that an idea of atonement is not a doctrine of atonement, not a comprehensive account of Christian teaching on the topic, and not a complete model of atonement either, though it may be an aspect of a particular presentation of Christian teaching on the matter.

In recent years, and in large measure because of the influence of Aulén’s work, there have been a number of attempts to provide a “rational theory” of the ransom atonement motif. Indeed, one might talk of it as the doctrine of choice for a range of contemporary theologians approaching the work of Christ.⁴ Yet alongside this burgeoning work on the ransom view there has not been a corresponding clarity about what we might call the mechanism by means of which atonement is supposed to obtain. To put it another way, often in reading accounts that purport to offer a ransom doctrine, rather than merely a ransom motif, one is left wondering how it is that Christ’s work achieves the reconciliation of human beings with God.

In this paper I attempt to do several things to address this issue, which I take to be the most important issue facing those wishing to articulate a ransom doctrine of atonement (as opposed to utilizing a ransom motif as part of some larger, more comprehensive account of atonement). First, I shall set out four versions of the

³ Thus my account of doctrine roughly corresponds to the first cognitive-propositional account in Lindbeck’s typology of theories of Christian doctrine in *The Nature of Doctrine*, 16.

⁴ This includes thinkers from a range of different ecclesial traditions. For instance, Aulén was Lutheran; J. Denny Weaver, author of *The Nonviolent Atonement. Second Edition* (2011), is Anabaptist; Gregory A. Boyd, contributor to *The Nature of Atonement: Four Views* (2006), is (broadly) Baptist; Jeremy Treat, author of *The Crucified King: Atonement and Kingdom in Biblical and Systematic Theology* (2014), is a free evangelical who is broadly Reformed in his sensibilities; Tom Wright, is an Anglican bishop, and author of *What St Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (1997); John Macquarrie was a Presbyterian-turned-Anglican who wrote *Principles of Christian Theology, Revised Edition* (1977 [1966]) that commends a version of *Christus Victor*; and so on.

doctrine that can be found in the work of several modern theologians. These are particular examples of what I shall call *interpretive strategies* for understanding the ransom view. They comprise: the denial of ransom in order to make room for an alternative understanding of Christ's victory; the attempt to expand the ransom motif into a complete doctrine of atonement; the attempt to assimilate the ransom account to some other understanding of atonement; and the attempt to relegate ransom to some less fundamental component of a rather different understanding of atonement. The first of these strategies is not a ransom view, strictly speaking, though it is clothed in the language and conceptual trappings of the ransom view. The second is unsuccessful because (as we shall see) it is unable to move beyond a motif, to a model of atonement. The third and fourth may provide ways in which to use ransom in constructive accounts of atonement as a part of a larger doctrinal whole, and I shall indicate how this might be achieved. In a closing section, I offer some reflections on why this conclusion is important for contemporary constructive accounts of Christ's work.

Variations on ransom and *Christus Victor* views of Christ's work

Let us turn to the matter of the doctrinal form of the doctrine. Although Aulén and others in imitation of him speak of the ransom view as the "classic" idea of atonement, or the *Christus Victor* view, as well as the "dramatic view" (1931, 20), I take it that the central claim of this account has to do with the notion of ransom. Often it is expressed like this: *Christ's work of redemption is fundamentally about him buying back human beings from the powers of sin, death, and the devil. His work is a ransom price that is paid to these powers in order that some number of fallen humanity may be redeemed from destruction, and brought to salvation. As with contemporary hostage scenarios, in this model of atonement humanity can only be released from bondage by the payment of a ransom price. In this case, the ransom price is the redeeming work of Christ.*

Call this notion that atonement is about a ransom paid to bring about human liberation from bondage to sin, death, and the devil *the core claim* of the Ransom model. In much historic discussion of this model, the core claim is embedded in a larger story about the aims and purpose of the work of Christ. Aulén places the core claim in the broader context of a story about the victory of Christ over the powers of sin, death, and the devil. The central theme of this "dramatic" view is, "the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ—*Christus Victor*—fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the 'tyrants' under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself" (Ibid.). He goes on to say, "this salvation is at the same time an atonement in the full sense of that word, for it is a work wherein God reconciles the world to Himself, and is at the same time reconciled" (Ibid.). J. Denny Weaver, in elaborating on Aulén's *Christus Victor* idea, writes "This atonement image used the image of cosmic battle between good and evil, between the forces of God and those of Satan. In that fray

God's son Jesus Christ was killed, an apparent defeat of God and victory by Satan. However, Jesus' resurrection turned the seeming defeat into a great victory, which forever revealed God's control of the universe and freed sinful humans from the power of sin and Satan" (2011, 15).

The most infamous of these redemption narratives in which the core claim is embedded is the "bait and hook" story of St Gregory of Nyssa. In his *Great Catechism*, he says this:

For since, as has been said before, it was not in the nature of the opposing power to come in contact with the undiluted presence of God, and to undergo His unclouded manifestation, therefore, in order to secure that the ransom in our behalf might be easily accepted by him who required it, the Deity was hidden under the veil of our nature, that so, as with ravenous fish, the hook of the Deity might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh, and thus, life being introduced into the house of death, and light shining in darkness, that which is diametrically opposed to light and life might vanish (1892, ch. 24).⁵

Similar accounts can be found in a number of other patristic authors, including St Irenaeus, Origen, St John Chrysostom, St John of Damascus, and even St Augustine of Hippo, who writes that, "As our price He held out His Cross to him like a mouse-trap, and as bait set upon it His own blood" (1920, 44).⁶ But clearly the defender of a ransom model of atonement need not hold to these rather lurid stories about divine deception of the devil in the incarnation. The core claim is independent of the particular stories in which it has often been embedded. This is important because some of the more superficial criticisms of the ransom view depend on the stories in which the core claim is embedded (e.g., the objection that, on Nyssa's bait and hook story, God appears to deceive the devil). The fact that the ransom account doesn't depend on any of these narratives means that such objections are beside the point in assessing its merits, for they are not part of its conceptual hardcore.

But *is* ransom the core claim, or is it Christ's victory over sin, death, and the devil? Denny Weaver's view has been widely canvassed and discussed in the recent atonement literature. One of the key claims he makes is that his own brand of *Christus Victor*, which he calls *narrative Christus Victor*, does not imply that God is involved in a violent act in bringing about the death of Christ. This is a controversial claim, offered as a contribution to the contemporary debate about violence and atonement. It is not clear to me how the crucifixion can be regarded as anything other than an act of violence, and one that, in some sense, God permits for the

⁵ Ch. 26 of the *Great Catechism* (1892) makes it clear that Gregory thinks God deceives the devil in proceeding as he does. Cf. St John Damascene, who says "Therefore Death will advance, and, gulping down the bait of the Body, be transfixed with the hook of the Divinity: tasting that sinless and life-giving Body, he is undone, and disgorges all whom he has ever engulfed [sic]: for as darkness vanishes at the letting in of light, so corruption is chased away by the onset of life, and while there is life given to all else, there is corruption only for the Corrupter" (1899, iii.27).

⁶ Grensted (1920) cites all these representatives of the Ransom view in his helpful digest of the doctrine.

purposes of reconciliation. But, in fact, it seems to me that Weaver's position does not depend in any fundamental way on claims about violence in the cross, despite his own views to the contrary. The reason for this is that he maintains that his own brand of *Christus Victor* is not about the death of Christ at all, but about the reign of God, the unveiling of which can be seen in Christ's work in his life, death, and resurrection. Thus Weaver:

What this book calls 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 (2011, 84-85).⁷

Later, he goes on to say, "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 way that his death is irreducibly *needed* in satisfaction theory" (Ibid., 89). This represents "one of the most profound differences between narrative Christus Victor and satisfaction atonement" (Ibid.).

According to Weaver, Christ's death was a consequence of his dedication to living out the reign of God. By accepting this mission, he acceded to death, which was a function of that mission, not its goal (Ibid., 91-92). But if narrative *Christus Victor* is actually about the reign of God in history exemplified in a particular manner by the life and work of Christ, where his death is not a goal of that work—not something necessary for that work, but merely a function of his faithfulness to his mission—then it is difficult to see how Weaver's narrative *Christus Victor* amounts to a ransom view of *atonement* at all. For, according to Weaver, Christ's work is not about reconciling fallen humans to God, but about the culmination of God's reign on earth. In one respect, Christ is the victor on this view—the one whose work is the culmination of the victory of God's reign. But not because he offers himself as a ransom to pay for human sin. We might say that Weaver's position is a *Christus Victor* motif without the core claim, and therefore, without being a ransom view at all.

There are those, however, for whom the victory motif is more fundamental than ransom, though ransom still has a role to play. This is N. T. Wright's view. He says,

The cross is for Paul the symbol, as it was the means, of the liberating victory of the one true God ... over all the enslaving powers that have usurped his authority.... For this reason I suggest that we give priority—a priority among equals, perhaps, but still a priority—to those Pauline expressions of the

⁷ For a recent symposium on the matter of violence and atonement where many of the contributors (including Weaver) draw on the *Christus Victor* view, see Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (2007).

crucifixion of Jesus which describe it as the decisive victory over the 'principalities and powers'. Nothing in the many other expressions of the meaning of the cross is lost if we put this in the centre (1997, 47).⁸

Divine victory over the powers of sin, death, and the devil is indeed an important biblical and theological component of the ransom view, which is why it is often called *Christus Victor*. But it is the *upshot* of that view—its consequence—not the view itself. In other words, it is because Christ's work is a ransom that he is victorious over these powers; ransom is not merely one way of construing Christ's victory, it is the reason why his work is characterized as a victory over sin, death, and the devil. So, *pace* Weaver and Wright, to make victory a more fundamental component than ransom is to turn this account of Christ's work on its head. Ransom is the core claim; victory is the result.

Kathryn Tanner has also recently argued that ransom is not, in fact, the fundamental motif at the heart of this account of the atonement, but for different reasons. First she demotes Aulén's argument. "*Christus Victor* is not a model at all," she remarks, "in that it fails, *per se*, to address the mechanism of the atonement. Christ is battling the forces of evil and sin on the cross but how is the battle won?" (2010, 253). The question is rhetorical, of course. But the expected response is clearly: we don't know because we are not told.

Tanner then provides an alternative: "Aulén does not see, however, that the incarnation is the very means by which the fight is waged and won. This claim is fundamental nonetheless to the early church theologians to whom he appeals. All of them view the incarnation ... as the key to the salvation of humanity" (Ibid., 254).⁹ This is in fact the underlying mechanism of atonement in Gregory of Nyssa's bait and hook story, on Tanner's way of thinking (Ibid., 255). A particularly vivid example of this can be found in St Cyril of Alexandria's analogy of the iron in the fire. He writes,

There was no other way for the flesh to become life-giving, even though by its own nature it was subject to the necessity of corruption, except that it became the very flesh of the Word who gives life to all things. This is exactly how it accomplishes his own ends, working by his own life-giving power. There is nothing astonishing here, for if it is true that fire has converse with materials which in their own natures are not hot, and yet renders them hot since it so abundantly introduces them to the inherent energy of its own power, then surely in an even greater degree the Word who is God can

⁸ For an insightful critique of Wright's account of atonement see Alan Spence (2006, ch. 1).

⁹ Earlier she says, "[t]he cross saves, not as a vicarious punishment or an atoning sacrifice or satisfaction of God's honor or as a perfectly obedient act.... The cross saves because in it sin and death have been assumed by the one, the Word, who cannot be conquered by them. Christ is the victor here, following Gustav Aulén's famous typology, but the underlying model is that of the incarnation itself" (Ibid., 29).

introduce the life-giving power and energy of his own self into his very own flesh (1995, 133-132).¹⁰

Adopting St Cyril's view, Tanner says that Christ's atoning work comprises the whole of his life from the first moment of incarnation to his resurrection. It is not restricted to his work on the cross, as if that can be abstracted from his incarnate life as the particular event by means of which human salvation obtains. What is more, in the very assumption of human nature there is a salvific communication of idioms in Christ (like St Cyril's analog of the iron in the fire), whereby the attributes of human life become the properties of the Word and (some of) the properties of the Word become properties of humanity (2010, 254).

Although she does not spell out exactly how this communication of idioms does the work of atonement, the idea seems to be this: in the very act of incarnation God the Son purifies the particular human nature he assumes in such a manner that the properties of the resulting sanctified nature may be ascribed to other instances of human nature by his divine power. What is more, only by recapitulating each stage of human life in a sinless manner, and by dying and rising again, is Christ in a position to offer the salvific benefits of his perfect incarnate life and death to fallen human beings via the communication of idioms. For only by recapitulating human life, and death, and defeating death by resurrection, can he be said to have sanctified the whole of a human life, the benefits of which may then be ascribed to other, fallen human beings. It cannot be just in virtue of the assumption of a particular human nature that Christ brings about human salvation, even if the assumed nature is purified in its hypostatic union with a divine person. Such a physical account of the atonement (as it is sometimes called) would leave opaque the mechanism by means of which the assumption of one human nature brings about salvation for other entities possessing a human nature in need of salvation. Tanner's account is more than a physical account of the atonement because she includes a notion of recapitulation, affirming the need for the life, death, and resurrection of Christ as aspects of the one work of atonement.¹¹ Nevertheless, Tanner's patristic-inspired doctrine of atonement, which relocates the heart of the mechanism from ransom to the vicarious humanity of Christ doesn't explain how it is that the assumption of human nature, or the communication of idioms in the person of Christ, or the recapitulation of the stages of human life in the life of Christ, brings about human salvation.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that one way to repair Tanner's reasoning at this juncture is to introduce a clearer notion of *representation*.¹² Then, the communication of idioms that obtains in the incarnation may provide a basis for atonement because Christ acts as our representative in assuming a human nature.

¹⁰ Tanner cites much of the same passage 2010, 256.

¹¹ Compare Khaled Anatolios on St Athanasius' soteriology: "Through his incarnation, the Son repairs our human participation in his imaging of the Father from within the human constitution; anything short of a full incarnation would leave humans disconnected from both Father and Son" (2011, 107). Anatolios is commenting on St Athanasius' work, *On the Incarnation*.

¹² See Oliver D. Crisp (2011, ch. 6).

The saving benefits of the work of Christ could then be imputed to other human beings by the power of the Holy Spirit in salvation. Following T. F. Torrance (whose view is similar to that of Tanner in some important respects), we might dub this the *vicarious humanity doctrine of atonement*.¹³ It is not entirely clear how Tanner thinks this story goes. But perhaps it is analogous to this one:

Vikram, a leading figure in Indian society, wishes to overthrow the caste system of India. In order to do so, he chooses as his bride a woman of the lowest caste, an Untouchable named Indira. In marrying Indira he marries one particular woman. Nonetheless, his action resonates beyond the change that marrying Vikram makes to Indira's life, across the lives of all or many women of the lowest caste. His action begins the process that will lead to their emancipation. It has whole-caste consequences.

Something like this story could be applied via Tanner's incarnation as atonement doctrine to the work of Christ. Like Vikram, God the Son unites himself to something 'untouchable' from a divine perspective, namely, a particular human nature that suffers from the effects of the fall, sanctifying it in the very act of assumption. But this particular action has much wider consequences. Through the assumption of the particular human nature of Christ, God the Son emancipates, or begins the emancipation of, all fallen human beings. His work has "whole caste consequences."¹⁴

Admittedly, much more would need to be said if we were attempting to offer a complete defense of Tanner's account. For present purposes, however, it is sufficient to see that she construes *Christus Victor* as a species of the ransom view, which (a) fails to apprehend what is most fundamental about the atonement, namely, the very act of incarnation itself, coupled with the communication of idioms and a doctrine of recapitulation; and (b) is an incomplete account of atonement without this.

Her own view is, I think, suggestive and interesting, and really does capture something important about many of the patristic accounts of atonement that Aulén and his epigone have overlooked.¹⁵ And, like Tanner, I agree that the *Christus Victor*

¹³ See Torrance (2008, 205). The historian of doctrine, J. N. D. Kelly, dubs this view the "physical" or "mystical" account of atonement, "which linked the redemption with the incarnation. According to this, human nature was sanctified, transformed and elevated by the very act of Christ's becoming man. Often, though not quite correctly, described as the characteristically Greek theory, it cohered well with the Greek tendency to regard corruption and death as the chief effects of the Fall" (1977, 375). But I distinguish the physical model from the vicarious humanity model in this way: the physical model presumes that the assumption of human nature is sufficient for atonement; the vicarious humanity model presumes that the assumption of human nature is necessary but not sufficient for atonement.

¹⁴ See Crisp (2001, 128), where the substance of this paragraph appears. I have adapted the text slightly.

¹⁵ This is one reason why Tanner's argument makes much better sense of a wider range of data. Whereas Aulén simply elides discussion of potential counterexamples to his *Christus Victor* in the Fathers (e.g., Athanasius *On the Incarnation*, or the views of Gregory Nazianzus), Tanner's view can

account does not provide a mechanism of atonement and that for this reason it is incomplete as a model of atonement (about which, more presently). But it is not clear to me that her alternative plugs that conceptual gap. For it is not clear to me how God the Son's act of assuming human nature, plus recapitulation, plus the communication of idioms doctrine actually provides salvation. This combination of notions may provide the raw materials for a mechanism for atonement. Nevertheless, it is still far from clear *given what she actually says* exactly how atonement is achieved.

Hans Boersma's work represents another recent attempt to rehabilitate Aulén's position. Although he thinks it represents "the most significant model of the atonement," he also maintains, like Tanner, that "it does not explain *how* Christ gains the victory" (2004, 181). It is a strange model of atonement that does not provide a clear account of the mechanism by means of which Christ is said to bring about human reconciliation with God. So it is puzzling that Boersma thinks this is true of the *most significant* model of atonement, since, one would think that a significant model of atonement would offer a complete, developed understanding of Christ's work, including some story about the mechanism of atonement. However, on Boersma's reckoning this is not the case with the ransom view. It requires supplementation by St Irenaeus's doctrine of recapitulation in order to provide a complete account of the means by which atonement obtains.¹⁶ "Christ's victory over the powers of darkness is the telos and climax of his work of recapitulation" (Ibid.), says Boersma. "In other words," he continues, "the victory is the *result* of the entire process of recapitulation" (Ibid.). Like Tanner, the Irenaean view Boersma has in mind involves Christ recapitulating each stage of our human development, providing a sinless template of human life, death, and resurrection, the benefits of which can then be transferred or imputed to fallen human beings. But as with Tanner, it is not clear how the addition of claims about the vicarious humanity of Christ, or about his recapitulation of each stage of human life, provides a work that atones for the sin of other human beings. Vicarious humanity or Irenaean recapitulation do not do this work without some further explanation about how it is that the benefits of Christ's work may be transferred from Christ to other, fallen human beings in need of salvation. Unfortunately, Boersma doesn't appear to go beyond this in his provision of a better way of construing *Christus Victor*.

Four interpretive strategies

incorporate them along with Gregory of Nyssa and others, as in different ways expressing her incarnation as atonement model.

¹⁶ In fact, he later points out that Irenaeus's doctrine includes elements of ransom, mediation, and moral example—what, according to Aulén's typology, represent the three historic models of atonement. See Boersma (2004, 200) and Aulén (1931, ch. VIII). Irenaeus's position is set forth in his *Against Heresies*.

Let us take stock. From these cameos of different treatments of the ransom view we may derive four interpretive strategies. The first of these distinguishes ransom and victory motifs in Christ's work, removes ransom, and provides a different account of the way in which Christ's work is a victory, one in which ransom plays no significant part—in fact, one in which Christ's death is no longer a necessary component. This is Weaver's position. The second interpretive strategy treats the ransom view as a distinct account of atonement with its own integrity, though it may be incomplete in important respects, or in need of further development (e.g., Aulén).¹⁷ This usually involves placing the core claim within the context of a particular narrative about how salvation is brought about by Christ, such as that provided by Gregory of Nyssa's bait and hook story. The third strategy augments ransom with additional notions which are supposed to fill in the conceptual gap in the ransom account, providing a clearer mechanism of atonement (thus, the assimilation of ransom to recapitulation in Boersma, and recapitulation plus the communication of idioms in Tanner). Depending on how we construe matters there may also be a fourth strategy here that, for all intents and purposes, eviscerates the doctrine, either removing the core claim and replacing it with a different mechanism of atonement, or relegating the core claim to some secondary status, substituting some more fundamental notion that performs the explanatory heavy-lifting with regard to the mechanism of atonement. This, I think, is one way of reading Tanner's strategy in her vicarious humanity account. It is different from the first strategy in that it does not drive a wedge between ransom and victory, but makes ransom and victory two motifs that belong to some more fundamental understanding of Christ's work.

The question is, are any of these strategies successful? As to the first, it should already be clear this is not a ransom view at all, but a distinct account of Christ's work that retains some of the trappings of the ransom account, but where victory is the dominant motif. For this reason, it can be discounted. The second strategy does not yield a distinct ransom model of atonement.¹⁸ The instances of the third and fourth strategies we have considered are also incomplete, though for different reasons. Although they assimilate ransom to some larger model, or relegate it to some secondary status in a model that has a more fundamental core claim about the mechanism of atonement, these larger wholes are still insufficient as complete accounts of atonement. For neither Boersma nor Tanner provide their readers with a clear mechanism of atonement even when they augment ransom with additional notions (as in the case of Boersma), or displace it, making some other, related understanding of atonement more conceptually fundamental (as with Tanner). Nevertheless, the direction in which the strategies of Boersma and Tanner

¹⁷ John Macquarrie presents a version of the ransom view that he takes to be a complete model of atonement in *Principles of Christian Theology* (1977, 318-321).

¹⁸ One recent attempt to provide a ransom model can be seen in the work of open theist and evangelical theologian, Gregory Boyd. He says that "The Christus Victor model was, in various forms, the dominant model for the first millennium of church history" (2006, 46). We have seen that there is good reason to doubt this claim about the history of the doctrine. In any case, Boyd is no clearer on the mechanism of atonement than other defenders of his view, as his fellow contributor Thomas Schreiner points out. See *Ibid.*, 52.

point is, I suggest, the right one. The way to understand ransom is not as an atonement model as such, let alone an atonement doctrine, but as an atonement motif. To this I would add the following: ransom is a motif that pertains to one *consequence* of atonement, namely, the victory of Christ over sin. It is not a motif about the nature of the atonement *per se*, but about its upshot. In the next section we shall set out one way of understanding ransom in this manner.

Ransom as victory motif

Recall that the core claim of the ransom view is something like the following:

(CC) Christ's work of redemption is fundamentally about him buying back human beings from the powers of sin, death, and the devil. His work is a ransom price that is paid to these powers in order that some number of fallen humanity may be redeemed from destruction, and brought to salvation.

There is a significant problem with the core claim as it stands, having to do with *the reification of powers to which Christ's ransom is paid*. It is not clear to me how sin and death are powers to which a ransom should be paid for the release of human beings. Nor is it clear to me why the devil should be paid a ransom for the release of human beings. True, Scripture speaks of human bondage to sin, of death as the wages of sin, and of the devil as the Tempter. All three are spoken of (as we saw N. T. Wright affirming earlier) in semi-personal terms in the biblical record, as "powers and principalities." Whatever one makes of this—and, to be frank, I do not know what to make of it—what seems to me to be the most fundamental problem with the core claim is that it says ransom is paid to these powers in Christ's work of redemption. It is not at all clear to me how Christ's work could be a ransom that is paid to such powers, or even how such powers might be said to be "paid off" by means of Christ's work, beyond some sort of poetic or rhetorical claim similar to the idea that religion is the opiate of the masses.

More problematic, perhaps: how does paying a ransom to sin, death, and the devil produce reconciliation with God? I don't think sin and death *are* entities with which one can enter into a transaction. Sin is a "want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God" (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, answer to Question 14). This is not a power in the sense of some semi-personal principality, but a moral state, and one can hardly enter into transactions with moral states, for they aren't agents. Similar considerations apply to death, which is just the cessation of the life of an organism or body. One cannot enter into transactions with the absence of bodily life. That is meaningless. As for the devil, a very foolish person might enter into transactions with him, but why would God do so? And what sound theological reason is there for thinking that human beings sold themselves into

slavery to the devil upon commission of original sin, so that they must be bought back from him at such a terrible price? This, it seems to me, is pure sophistry.¹⁹ God does not transact with the devil for human salvation. For as St Anselm made plain in *Cur Deus homo* I.7, both fallen humans and the devil belong to God:

But since in fact neither the devil nor human beings belong to anyone other than God or stand outside God's power, on what grounds was God obligated to do anything with his own, about his own, or in his own, other than to punish his own slave who had persuaded a fellow slave to abandon their common master and transfer allegiance to him, a traitor harboring a fugitive, a thief who received a thief along with what he had stolen from his master? For both of them were thieves, since at one thief's persuasion the other their stole himself from his master (2007, 251).

But perhaps we can demythologize the core claim, denuding it of reference to powers to whom Christ pays a ransom.²⁰ Call this the *demythologized core claim*:

(DCC) Christ's work of redemption can be pictured as him buying back human beings subject to sin and death. It is like a ransom price that is paid out in order that some number of fallen humanity may be redeemed from destruction, and brought to salvation.

But once we exchange the core claim for the demythologized core claim, it becomes clear why ransom is no more than an atonement motif. It provides no mechanism for atonement; its language is metaphorical, comparative, unfitted to giving us a clear basis for a doctrine of atonement. However, it may be regarded as an auxiliary claim about the outcome of atonement. The upshot of Christ's work is indeed the release of human beings subject to sin and death. When viewed in these terms his work is a ransom price of sorts: it is the price requisite to bring about human reconciliation, paid by Christ. He is our substitute; he represents us in atonement. But it is not a ransom in the sense that it really is a work equivalent in value to the price fixed for the ransom of some number of fallen humanity from another power, whether sin, death, the devil, or God. Hence, when we read in Mark 10:45 that "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many," or in Colossians 1:13 that "he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves," and "having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them

¹⁹ Objection: 1 John 3:8 says, "Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." But this does not literally mean that human sinners belong to the devil, but that human sinners are associated with the devil, who is a habitual sinner, whose works of sin Christ has come to destroy. But this is consistent with what is stated above.

²⁰ Macquarrie also attempts a demythologized version of the ransom account, but his involves importing elements of sacrifice and Christ's prophetic office into what I am calling the core claim, thus making ransom one element in a larger whole.

by the cross” (Colossians 2:15). I presume we should understand such passages as conveying a picture of Christ’s work. The picture is this: in his life, death, and resurrection Christ somehow brings about human reconciliation with God, buying us back, as it were, at the great price of his own life in an act of vicarious supererogation.²¹

The dogmatic limitations of ransom

I have argued that ransom is an atonement motif, not a model or doctrine of atonement. Thus, Aulén was right to say it was not an historic *doctrine* of atonement, but wrong to think that more work on the motif would produce a complete model in due course. The main reason for this is that ransom does not provide a distinct mechanism for atonement. It is merely a motif. What is more, it is a motif about the upshot of Christ’s work, not about its nature. Finally, I am in agreement with critics of ransom who argue that it is not, as is often claimed, *the* patristic doctrine, or *the most common* patristic view of Christ’s work. It is an ancillary motif in a number of patristic accounts. These writers did not have carefully worked out accounts of the atonement. What is more, there are several other atonement themes in patristic theology including the Irenaean recapitulation view beloved of Boersma, and the notion of vicarious humanity that has recently been developed by theologians like T. F. Torrance and Kathryn Tanner. It may be that these themes do provide the elements of a distinct doctrine of atonement. But if they do, it is not the ransom view, which was only ever an idea in search of a model of atonement.

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²¹ Objection: What of Hebrews 2:14-15? It states, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too [i.e., Christ] shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” Response: I take this to be a reference to the devil’s role as the agent through whom sin is supposed to have entered the creation in the Primeval Prologue of Genesis 1-3. It would be odd to think he has some sort of devolved responsibility for death when Christ declares that he holds the keys to death and Hades in Revelation 1:18.

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