Beyond Atonement

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Christ Transcends our Created Limitation by Recapitulation

Atonement means becoming 'at one' again, and in theology, that generally means being reconciled with God by the removal of whatever is taken to stand in the way of that relationship. In some circles, the doctrine of the atonement is the central notion in Christian theology.

Western theology has broadly maintained, since the early centuries, that we as human beings have a twofold predicament. On the one hand we have a problem about the past: we have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God, and we will accordingly have to face judgement, which is very likely to find us wanting, and thus confront the prospect of terrible punishment, not to discipline us for future righteousness, but to balance the eternal scales of justice; and consequently, we face our death, the moment of that judgement, with deep foreboding. On the other hand, we have a problem about the future: we are mortal, and limited, and will expire, and will necessarily cease to exist, and pass into oblivion, as if we had never been, because all things in existence had a beginning and will eventually pass away, and we are no different, so we face a full stop at the moment of our death. And these two problems constitute the nature of the human predicament – dynamic, but deeply flawed; alive, but only for a brief span. We could call them the twin problems of guilt and mortality, or, to use more conventional language, sin and death.

See how Western theology thus makes the fall the pivotal moment in the human story. If we follow the Genesis story, Adam and Eve were created without guilt and without mortality: sin and death only entered the world once their original disobedience was perpetrated. The Genesis story doesn't purport to be true, in the sense of being historical, having actually taken place and being caught on camera by a private detective God sent to check up on the happy duo. But the Genesis story absolutely purports to be true when it comes to our preternatural impulse to put ourselves rather than God at the centre of the story, to forget that we've been given the superabundance of the fruit of every tree in the garden, to fixate on the one tree whose fruit is forbidden to us and build up resentment to displace our gratitude, and to create a false story by which we disavow our own responsibility and pass it

down the chain from the man to the woman and from the woman to the serpent.

The most common strategy for commending the Christian faith to a newcomer has been to appeal to this twin human predicament of guilt and mortality. See how we get it so terribly wrong, and we will surely be held to account for our failures; and see how we are going to die, and what will become of us? And it is at this point, where the evangelist has so thoroughly confronted us with the demoralising reality of our fecklessness and the even more depressing prospect of our impending demise, that, like a rabbit from a hat, is brought out the figure of Jesus. Jesus is a man from a faraway land, the Holy Land, who in fact also comes from an even further-away land, heaven, or the right hand of the Father. And, as luck, or fate, or as it turns out, providence would have it, Jesus is the very exact answer to both prongs of our human predicament. He deals with our sin by taking our guilt on his shoulders and suffering and dying in our place, thus leaving us free from judgement and able to stand in the face of God; and he deals with our mortality by rising from the dead, thus destroying the power of death, and offering us the gift of eternal life with him.

And this twofold gospel is conventionally accompanied by a requirement, often expressed by adopting the words of John 3:16: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' Notice how this verse begins with the words 'gave his only Son,' which are often taken as a reference to dying on the cross for our sins, and concludes with the phrase 'may have everlasting life,' which seem clearly to be a reference to the gift of our own resurrection, even if without an explicit mention of Jesus' resurrection. But notice in particular that in between we find the phrase 'everyone who believes in him,' which becomes the coda to the gifts of forgiveness and resurrection. By that I mean a conventional evangelist will present the free gifts of the forgiveness of sin and the overcoming of death but with one condition: you must believe in him. While this might sound like the most natural thing in the world, the way those words 'believe in him' are often interpreted, particularly in regard to forms of devotion, particular lifestyles, and additional required convictions, can make believing less a glorious gift than an onerous, almost impossible, and sometimes distasteful burden. Which can result, and to be truthful for countless people has resulted, in not a wondrous release from the prison of the past and the fear of the future, but in an intensification of guilt and a

paralysing dread of the future, all focused in a tortured tussle of whether or not to believe, or whether one's faltering yet earnest belief will be considered sufficient.

Which is so many kinds of sad, because, while I recognise that elements of everything I've so far described are to be found in the Bible, I've come to understand that Christianity offers us a more radical gospel, with a different centre, a different goal, and a different notion of what kind of good news Christ actually brings. What I want to do today is to revisit the conventional atonement theories that tell the traditional story and elicit from them what they might really be saying and how we might slightly recalibrate them to identify the truth about God, a love so amazing and so divine that it demands our soul, our life and our all.

I'm going to make my way through five theories in a logical order. That order is from Jesus' birth to his resurrection. So I'm now going to start with Jesus' birth. The recapitulation theory is the oldest of the theories of the atonement, arising in the second century. In Latin rhetoric, orators conclude their speeches by going over the strongest arguments one last time; that process is called recapitulation. Irenaeus of Lyons believed Jesus was the climax of time and destiny, in whom the whole logic of God is expressed. Irenaeus saw Adam and Eve less as sinners than as immature children. Impatiently, they grasped at divine life, something that couldn't be snatched, only received. In sinning, they lost their potential for immortality. Hence Jesus comes to restore humankind to its full potential for everlasting life. He is the second Adam, who makes the right choice at every moment when Adam made the wrong choice. He reverses the price of Adam's disobedience through his own perfect obedience. He goes through every stage of life – conception, birth, baptism, growth, temptation, betrayal, death, resurrection and ascension. Each one matters. The cross is the climax, because there Jesus shows consummate love to those who caused his agony. As one interpreter puts it, 'Everything Adam did, Jesus undid. Everything Adam failed to do, the Second Adam did.'

There's a lot that's attractive about the recapitulation theory. Most of all, it portrays the cross as the ultimate demonstration and symbol of love: 'love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be,' as the hymn puts it. This is a great way to start our exploration. It also does a good job of incorporating both sin and death: it turns sin into immaturity, which arguably isn't taking it sufficiently seriously, and it overcomes death by restoring humankind's original potential for immortality. The other thing that's really positive about

recapitulation is that it offers a genuine explanation for why God created the world. It's important to realise that the other historical theories don't have a plausible reason why God created the universe. But Irenaeus does. Human beings were created to be God's companions. As infants, they couldn't comprehend their humanity, their potential or their perfection. So God made them immature, so they could grow into perfection. While we never get a real explanation for why humankind was created so flawed, at least we have a vision for why we have a creation at all.

But recapitulation has one major problem that it shares with the other four well-known theories. It has no use for most of the things the gospels tell us, such as the parables and healings and dialogues with disciples and crowd and authorities. Jesus' profound and radical relationships with women, lepers, outcasts and strangers are irrelevant to his purpose in coming. And I want to make this our first insight to carry forward: Jesus' ministry is almost entirely made up of relationships. The gospels describe Jesus and the people he was with. He wasn't simply a man on a mission who had to tick a large number of boxes before departing, as if the incarnation were some kind of treasure hunt. Even on the cross, perhaps especially on the cross, the relationships are crucial: with the others crucified beside him, with the beloved disciple and his mother, with the scoffing bystanders and mocking rulers, and most of all with his heavenly Father. The relationships are what the story is all about. Irenaeus has nothing to say about these relationships. If we're going to form a deeper, truer, more wondrous notion of what is happening on Good Friday, it's got to circle around these relationships. After all, the Trinity itself is a relationship. Relationship isn't just the heart of Good Friday; it's the heart of God.

Christ Transforms our Hardheartedness by Example

After the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in June 2022, we at St Martin's reflected on the festivities. We concluded that next time there was a major national event we should set up a large screen and invite 300 or so people to watch it in the crypt. And so it was that many people gathered three months later in the crypt at St Martin's to watch the Queen's funeral. I felt I was doing important pastoral work for a whole morning just watching the telly. But it turned out the real pastoral work of the day came after the service, in the conversations I found myself having with diverse range of people who'd made their way into the crypt that day, mostly through having found the streets of

central London too crowded to see through. One conversation I vividly remember. I spoke to a woman with a very strong Turkish accent, who had shiny cheeks from tears that had been flowing throughout the service. I checked to see if she was distressed, but it turned out she was deeply moved by the ceremony, despite being a secular Muslim. I said as gently as I could, 'Tell me about what your tears mean.' She replied, 'This woman was obviously a person of real faith. I want to know more about the God who made her such an exceptional person. I want to believe in a God like that.'

What my new Turkish friend probably didn't realise was that she was perfectly expressing a theory of the atonement, in this case what's usually called moral influence. This understanding, sometimes called the exemplarist theory, says that on Good Friday Christ's sacrificial and selfless example elicits a transformational response in those who witness it, either in person on the day, or us who read about and ponder it later. It's common for advocates of the three theories we're going on to consider to be quite rude about the moral influence theory, describing it as subjective. By contrast they call their preferred theories objective, because in them something actually changes in the reality of existence or the disposition of God or the scales of eternal justice – whereas in the moral influence theory the only thing that changes is the heart of the believer.

But that's to undersell the moral influence approach. Lloyd C. Douglas's 1942 novel *The Robe*, also a 1953 film, tells of Marcellus, the Roman military tribune responsible for Jesus' crucifixion. He arrives in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and is assigned the macabre task of organising the crucifixion. He wins Jesus' robe at dice but then finds the robe has strange effects on him: when he uses it to shield himself from the elements, it causes him sudden, intense pain. Marcellus, now haunted by memories of Jesus' crucifixion, reports back to Emperor Tiberius. Tiberius gives Marcellus an imperial commission to find and destroy the robe as well as the followers of Jesus. Instead, Marcellus joins Simon Peter as an apostle, and comes to Rome, where he allows himself to be captured so his friend and fellow apostle can escape. The story ends with Marcellus being led away to execution.

The film *The Robe* not only illustrates the moral influence theory: it shows how the cross can affect those who didn't personally witness it, and, in Marcellus' missionary work and sacrifice to let another live, it shows how the one morally influenced by Jesus' cross ends up imitating Jesus' life even to the point of death.

Perhaps the classic portrayal of exemplarism is Isaac Watts' Passiontide hymn 'When I survey the wondrous cross.' When he was 17, Watts complained to his father about the dreariness of existing hymns. His father challenged him to do better. It was one of the most significant conversations in the history of hymnody. The following week Isaac presented his first hymn, 'Behold the glories of the Lamb.' A further 750 followed. 'When I survey' is not so much a hymn about what Christ achieved on the cross, as about how his example changes my own life. The words 'me,' 'my' and 'I' occur 12 times in 16 lines. One of the most poignant phrases is, 'Did e'er such love and sorrow meet…?' The cross is the very extreme of sorrow but also the very extreme of love. Christianity is the recognition that true love must face untold sorrow if it is to be embodied in everlasting companionship. But the criticisms of exemplarism all apply to this hymn. There's no sign of any change in existence, in God, or in justice: instead, all the change happens in the heart of the believer. This is a story that's fundamentally about us.

The moral influence theory is different from the other four historical theories we're looking at in one important respect: it isn't fixated on the twofold sin and guilt problem. From the traditional atonement perspective, this is its greatest weakness; but in the way I see things it constitutes its greatest strength. The reason many theologians are rude about it is because it doesn't objectively take away guilt or mortality, and so it doesn't seem to affect the believer's status, if you're assuming that status is to be in profound eternal jeopardy of punishment or oblivion. But what it does instead is recognise the real human problem is isolation and the breakdown of relationships, with God and one another, thus addressing the problem we noted in the recapitulation theory. For the exemplarist, Jesus' cross transforms the believer and impels the believer into restored and grateful relationships with God, with one another, and today we'd say with the wider creation. That's getting what happens on Good Friday onto the right territory. It anticipates a response from the disciple that's not just passive belief, but active change in self and society. Unlike other theories, moral influence isn't done on Good Friday: it requires transformed relationships thereafter.

So there's a lot that's right about the moral influence theory. But one thing that's wrong, which it shares with the other four historical theories, is that it's decontextualised. Jesus appears like a Martian dropped from the sky. There's no significant reference to the fact that he was a Jew, that he stands in the Old Testament tradition of prophets, priests and kings who have shaped and

reflected Israel's life of faith, that he's a member of a race that's been called by God to be a nation through whom all peoples will find a blessing. Like almost all theological models coming out of the middle ages, it has an uncomfortable strain of antisemitism. That doesn't in this case mean the specific vilification and persecution of Jews. Here, more subtly, it means the attempt to write Judaism out of the story altogether.

Meanwhile because Jesus is presented without context, his divinity isn't especially important, and his race and heritage not important at all. He could in principle be replaced by any suitable figure – Buddha, Socrates, Teresa of Calcutta – who held their own life as nothing compared to the profundity of their reconciling path, and who had a significant effect on one who witnessed them. In that sense exemplarism is different from the other theories, in that it isn't specifically Christian at all. The fact that Christ is regarded as the Son of God isn't the point. The point is that he demonstrates what a good and perfect life and death look like and moves the believer to follow in his steps.

For this reason the moral influence theory seldom in history or today stands alone. It usually embellishes and enriches believers' commitments to the other theories. I think there's a lot to be said for it and, as I have hinted and will later fully express, I think it's the only one of the historic theories that belongs in a truly dynamic and radical Christian faith. That's why the Queen's funeral was so powerful. Like my Turkish friend, we all felt we'd like to know more about the God who inspired such a remarkable and faithful woman. And we'd all like to share that love so amazing and so divine that demands our soul, our life, our all.

Christ's Suffering Redeems our Human Debt through Satisfaction

Shakespeare's 1598 play *The Merchant of Venice* tells of the lovelorn Bassanio, who borrows from his wealthy friend Antonio to enable him to court the beautiful Portia. Antonio's wealth is tied up in three ships all currently at sea, so he visits Shylock the Jewish moneylender and obtains a loan of 3000 ducats on condition that Shylock may take a pound of Antonio's flesh if he cannot repay on the agreed date. But Antonio's ships are lost, and although Bassanio, now married to the wealthy Portia, offers 6000 ducats, Shylock, full of fury because his daughter has eloped with a Christian, demands his rightful pound of Antonio's flesh – which everyone assumes will be fatal. However a mysterious lawyer appears and advocates the quality of

mercy, which 'is twice blest: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.' Shylock stands firm, but the lawyer convinces the court that Shylock is entitled only to Antonio's flesh, and must not shed a drop of blood, nor take a fraction more or less than exactly a pound; whereupon Shylock yields. In moments, Shylock is himself condemned when the lawyer cites a Venetian law that forces a Jew to forfeit his property should he plot the death of a citizen. The lawyer turns out to be Portia in disguise; thus the tables are turned not just on Shylock, but on all the male characters in the play.

While almost unperformable today, being so laced with contemporary antisemitism, the play focuses attention on the plight of one who cannot discharge an unpayable debt. In the play Antonio is saved because of Portia's ingenuity, the discovery of arcane laws, and endemic discrimination against Jews. But what if these three elements were absent? Antonio would face justice, and while Portia might make a plea for mercy, the rule of law would demand that, in more cases than not, justice should prevail, however ghastly its implications. You can't attend a performance of *The Merchant of Venice* without a shiver going down your spine at this prospect, and without a cold confrontation with what it means to shoulder a debt you can't repay. The power of Christianity for many believers for many centuries has been that humankind is in precisely that condition, and that Christ plays the role of Portia, with one key difference: he doesn't argue with the Father; instead, he himself offers satisfaction for the debt, placing himself in Antonio's position and offering his own flesh instead of humankind's.

Jesus refers in Mark chapter 10 to giving up his life 'as a ransom for many.' This reference yields two kinds of understandings of what's called the satisfaction or ransom theory. The first is the practical and moral responsibility of fulfilling legitimate obligations. This is both to preserve civility and good will and to address any hurt or repair any damage when those obligations haven't been met. Thus if I promise to repair your steps, I need to keep that promise; if I do the job badly, I need to come back and do it properly. But if my doing it badly is the cause of you falling down the steps and breaking your leg, I need to pay for your medical treatment and rehabilitation. In this case accepting my payment is an act of mercy on your part, because in fact no treatment or rehabilitation will restore the leg to its condition before the break, so it's only a gesture, and you treating it as adequate satisfaction is an act of mercy on your part. It's mercy because you're not exacting punishment, retribution, or vengeance. Thus while Jesus dying

on the cross looks like cruel torture, in the satisfaction theory it's actually an act of mercy from God to us, because as a result God spares us punishment, retribution, or vengeance.

The other kind of understanding is that in the fall, Adam and Eve transferred their allegiance from God to Satan, and that Jesus' suffering and death on the cross was a ransom that bought humankind back from Satan and restored us to God's company. This notion begins from Jesus' description in John 14 of Satan as the 'ruler of this world.' In this ransom theory God satisfies Satan by paying a price that humankind could never pay. Often theologians recoil at any suggestion that God owes something to Satan, or that Satan is a power at large almost equal to God in competition for human souls, so after the first millennium this theory was altered to say that what satisfaction needed to address was the damage to God's honour. Thus only humankind *should* pay the debt to satisfy God's affronted honour, while only God *could* offer such satisfaction: hence Jesus, the God-man, was the only one who could combine obligation and capacity, and his life satisfied the unpayable debt. As Cecil Frances Alexander puts it, 'There was no other good enough To pay the price of sin.'

There's perhaps only one good thing to say about satisfaction or ransom theories, and that is they should evoke in the believer an overwhelming sense of gratitude. Just as humankind is utterly in God's debt for the gift of life and existence, so is the believer utterly in God's debt for the gift of eternal life and restored relationship. But that's about as far as it goes. Even once you've ruled out any idea that God has some debt to pay to Satan, there are a lot of problems with satisfaction theories. I'm just going to dwell on the two that are instructive for what we'll explore later.

The first is that God is not in anyone's or anything's pocket. If God wants to forgive us and/or grant us everlasting life, God can do so. All this talk of some prison from which humankind needs rescuing, or necessity that God has to subscribe to, or justice that God must uphold, or honour God must rectify, or debt God must insist we pay, is nonsense. It's a fanciful and burdensome construction. How could the Trinity, an eternal force of abundant glory, be in the grip of such strictures or limitations? God is sovereign and God is free. No more of this absurdity of God getting in a scrape by siding with us and only just escaping after ghastly retribution.

The second is that the Christian story is not fundamentally rooted in the condition of deficit. The satisfaction theory, like all the ancient theories besides moral influence, describes the human condition in negative terms. Sometimes that deficit is transactional, like impinging God's honour; other times it's relational, like our guilt for our broken covenants with God and one another. Invariably it centres on a problem. By contrast, I believe the Christian story is one of abundance. The Trinity exudes plenitude. Creation is limitless in its wonder. The incarnation is glorious in its effervescence. The Spirit fills the earth with love and grace. The end of the world draws everything into its ultimate purpose. The story is not one in which deficit has the first or last word. The satisfaction theory distorts the incarnation by turning it into an instrument of rectifying a deficit, rather than of embodying an abundance.

Fundamentally, the satisfaction theory offers us a deeply problematic portrayal of God, who either holds grudges, or is subject to a force more determinative than grace. What's taking place on Good Friday is something mush more, and much more wonderful, than that.

Christ's Death Propitiates the Father's Wrath through Substitution

One of the first serious scriptural encounters with the violent anger of God comes in Exodus 32, after the people, frustrated by Moses' long absence up Mt Sinai, make a golden calf and begin to worship it. Moses is so furious that he breaks the precious stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments in two. Meanwhile those who supported Moses slew 3000 of their brothers, friends and neighbours. Moses then speaks to God and offers to die and be blotted out of God's book that the people may be spared and forgiven. God refuses the offer. But it introduces the idea that one person can die on behalf of the shortcomings of the many, and that the punishment rightly belonging to a whole people can be exacted on a single individual.

This view is encouraged by the text that has proved most influential as the backdrop to Good Friday, Isaiah 53. The words of this passage from the exile, a passage that transforms Israel's notion of God from monarch to servant, are laced through the Passion narrative. 'Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our

iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.'

When Paul comes to interpret what is happening on Good Friday, he adopts the notion of penal substitution in a variety of forms, of which two stand out. We can call them the judicial and the sacral. The judicial appears in Romans 3. There he says that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,' but that 'they are now justified by his grace as a gift,' and this happens 'through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.' This passage displays the three key features of penal substitution: Jesus came to stand in for us; his redemption is effective in enabling us to stand before the Father; and this transformation is available to all who believe.

The second, sacral, form is found in Galatians 3, where Paul changes the frame of reference from legal punishment to sacral curse. He says everyone who lives simply by the Jewish law or by adherence to strictures devoid of faith is under a curse. Christ delivers us from and cancels this curse by himself becoming a curse. Paul quotes the words of Deuteronomy, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree,' to show how on Good Friday Jesus diverts the curse due to the believer and diverts it onto himself. Unlike satisfaction, by which in an act of mercy God accepts an alternative to punishment and overlooks human sin, in penal substitution there is no alternative to punishment and Christ steps in to receive the punishment on humankind's behalf.

Whereas satisfaction theories assume the metaphors or debt and payment, substitution theories assume judicial or sacral contexts. Whether in the language of the law court or in the imagery of sorcery, the theory of penal substitution describes how believers are delivered from the rightful punishment due to sin by Christ standing in their place and taking that punishment on himself. Lest we hastily dismiss substitution, it's good to recall how it has inspired some of the most moving imitations and gestures in Christian history. Maximilian Kolbe, born in Poland in 1894, was a Franciscan friar and Catholic priest. One priest recalled meeting him at his monastery in 1939. He encouraged Kolbe to escape. Kolbe shook his head. He already perceived that he had to be arrested and to be killed. The friars of his monastery were indeed arrested, and eventually sent to Auschwitz. In July 1941, about a month after Kolbe's arrival, three prisoners disappeared from the camp and were missing during rollcall. The officers rounded up 10

prisoners to be taken to an underground cell and starved to death as a collective punishment. One prisoner pleaded with the officer that he had children and a family. Maxmilian Kolbe volunteered to take his place. For 14 days his resistance to the tortures of hunger and the guards' antagonism drove the camp authorities to distraction, so much so that they could take it no longer and ordered his death by lethal injection on August 14, which is now his saint's day.

Maximilian Kolbe's story illustrates all that's right about the penal substitution theory. It's about noble sacrifice. It's about an admirable gesture that has been imitated and admired for centuries. It demonstrates the extraordinary love of God in Christ.

But there are major problems with the penal substitution theory; perhaps greater problems than with any other of the ancient theories. We can call them internal problems that deal with the details of the theory and external ones that reject the whole metaphorical field the theory presupposes. Starting with internal problems, the simple truth is that substitution is not justice: it compounds injustice. You can't kill the wrong person and call it just, even if that person dies willingly to save someone else. Meanwhile there can't be a correspondence by which one person's unmerited temporary albeit agonising suffering and death covers for a whole swathe of humanity's apparently deserved eternal torment. It doesn't add up. And again, it's not clear how Jesus' death makes atonement for sins not yet committed. Those sins seem either unatoned for or unaccountable.

Valid as these criticisms are, the true wrath of believers and unbelievers has been visited on external problems. At the centre of these rejections lies the monstrous portrayal of God the theory offers. Here is a God who creates only to condemn, who sets up a system explicitly designed to lead his son to agonising death, and who seems to prefer such an arbitrary and transactional metaphor to anything like true reconciliation and restoration. Some critics have called this a cosmic assault on one's own child. Often the antecedent story in the imagination of the advocate of substitution is that of Abraham being on the point of sacrificing Isaac when the Holy Spirit points out the ram in the thicket and enjoins him to slaughter the ram instead of his son. The story of Isaac's sacrifice is crucial to understanding the slaughter of lambs at Passover and the identification of Jesus as the Lamb of God, who becomes the new Passover and the new ram, dying that we might live. But it's one of the most notorious stories in the Old Testament, precisely because in demanding

that Abraham slay his son, God is presented as a ghastly parody of the God who longs to be in trusting, gracious and mutual relationship with us. How can our salvation depend on God doing something that, if we did it, we'd rightly face life imprisonment?

Serious as these concerns are, I think there's an even greater problem, one that's shared with all the five historic theories, but is most egregiously visible in the penal substitution theory. And that is anthropocentrism. By this I mean that the whole story of Christianity is one in which God's purpose is to rescue humankind, and the whole story centres our guilt and our mortality. Christ only appears as a character who comes to fix our human problem. He subsequently plays no significant role in the story besides banishing forever those who don't believe. We don't *enjoy* God, filling our lives with gratitude and grace and awe and mercy; instead, we *use* God as an instrument of our own need. The point of the substitution story is not for us to dwell with God and one another forever; the point is to be delivered from guilt and mortality. Besides being a grotesque account of God, it offers a selfish and self-absorbed portrayal of humankind. Beyond that, there's no collective account of human survival; all that's secured is renewed innocence and eternal life. But surely if that life is without one another and the creation, it's more like isolated hell than convivial heaven.

So penal substitution heads to the bottom of the class of atonement theories, because it makes every single one of the wrong moves we've identified elsewhere, while adding a few of its own. Just to be clear, that means it has nothing to say about anything in Jesus' life leading up to Holy Week, neither his Jewish identity nor his transformational relationships. It defines the Christian story by deficit rather than abundance, making the fall rather than the incarnation the defining moment, and it diminishes the incarnation by making it the result of contingent human failure rather than original divine purpose. It portrays God as subject to some kind of law or requirement, thus going against the notion of God as sovereign. Worst of all, it portrays God as a manipulative and cruel tyrant and makes Jesus a tool that responds to human need rather than as embodying God's glorious grace. It's almost a caricature of a wrong turning in Protestant theology that doesn't mind distorting God, instrumentalising Jesus and decentring the Trinity provided it can hang on to its claim that the story is all about getting humankind off the hook of sin and death.

Christ’s Victory Conquers Death through Resurrection

It’s a little-known fact that C.S. Lewis is not numbered among the gospel writers, and that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* does not appear in the New Testament. Nonetheless it’s hard to overestimate the impact of the story of Aslan the Lion on the religious imagination of Christians since the middle of the twentieth century. In Lewis’ 1950 novel, the White Witch, who keeps Narnia in perpetual winter, plys Edmund with Turkish delight and promises him a princedom, for which he is prepared to betray his three siblings and the kindly lion, Aslan. Aslan returns to Narnia, whereupon the snow begins to melt. Aslan persuades the White Witch to take his life and set Edmund free. Aslan dies, but the next morning is restored to life and kills the witch, going on to restore to life all she has turned to stone and defeat her forces in battle.

What this story does is to engage other atonement theories, notably substitution and moral influence, while focusing attention on something more primal, namely the power to overcome death and prove victorious in an ultimate battle. Aslan’s intervention is moving and sacrificial, but most profound of all is his role, like David stepping out of the Israelite armies to confront Goliath, of being the representative of all humankind, perhaps all creation, against the representative of evil and death, and proving victorious.

This is a notion of victory, principally over death but also over sin and evil, or the devil. This victory takes place on the cross, but is confirmed and made visible in Jesus’ resurrection. Easter hymns are laden with imagery of triumph and conquest. ‘Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son’ is the most prominent, but think of second verse of the eleventh-century hymn. ‘Ye choirs of new Jerusalem’: ‘For Judah's Lion burst his chains, crushing the serpent's head; and brought with him, from death's domains, the long-imprisoned dead.’ If you see the origins of religion in humankind’s terror in the face of death, these are some of the most primal and visceral claims in the whole of Christianity. It’s the death of death, and hell’s destruction, as the hymn ‘Guide me O thou great redeemer’ puts it.

It's important to note that, while you could call penal substitution a rather bourgeois, arm’s-length theory, the victory theory is the people’s gospel. It’s experienced a revival in liberationist circles, because it upholds Christ’s final conquest of all the powers that oppress us, not only death and sin, but also sexism, racism, and a host of other forms of oppression. It’s the gospel of the

African American spirituals and the longing of the struggling masses yearning to be free. One theologian has explored in detail the scriptural language of the principalities and the powers, and how Jesus conquers every one of them and harrows hell, delivering it of those in the dungeon of despair. This is a God who's on our side, who has our back, who's our champion and will finally prevail.

What could be wrong with such a theory? I suggest two things, which together go to the heart of how we think about what's happening on Good Friday. The first is what Jews and secularists say about the cross: if Jesus truly has conquered sin and death, if Christ has overcome all the powers that oppress us, if death has no more dominion, as Paul proclaimed and Dylan Thomas explained, then … how come death and sin and oppression are all around us and seem to the unbiased eye to be in full swing? Conquering sin and death may have been Jesus' aim, but surely if it was it's been a failure. The standard response to this criticism is to invoke a war analogy: VE Day was the end of the second world war in Europe, but the decisive battle was fought a year before on D-Day when the Allies got a foothold in France. So the cross and resurrection are like D-Day, while the last day is like VE Day. The problem with this and other such defences is they leave an awful lot for God still to do on the Last Day. And the more God has to do on the Last Day, the more you wonder what was actually achieved on Good Friday, if anything at all. If you take the victory approach, really you should be focusing most of your attention on the Last Day, when the defeat of all that oppresses us finally takes place. But if that's the case, why did Jesus have to die on the cross at all, and what use is his resurrection? The victory theory doesn't have a good answer to this complaint.

But there's an even more far-reaching problem with the victory theory, which is also a serious problem with the substitutionary and satisfaction theories. It's possibly the biggest reason why all five historic theories are profoundly flawed, and why today I'm seeking to show how we can go beyond all of them. I want to express this not as a criticism of the atonement, but as a statement of something much more positive – so positive that, as soon as I say it, I'm confident that it's a conviction with which no Christian would want to disagree. Here it is. God's means and God's ends are identical. God's purpose, and God's way of achieving that purpose, are entirely aligned. God does not turn into someone or something totally out of character in order to achieve or secure something more important than the Trinity being true to itself. How

can any of those statements possibly not be true? They're true not only because God, as sovereign, has no need or reason to change purpose or character. But they're also true because if God really were to change character, however worthy the reason, how could we ever ultimately trust that God's character was the one we thought we knew and loved, rather than the other one?

If we're agreed that God's means and God's ends are identical, then the most influential of the historic atonement theories, satisfaction, substitution, and victory all fail. Because all of them require God to be pushed significantly and damagingly out of shape in order to achieve something we believe is foundational – our redemption, justification or salvation. But surely the damage is too great. We've already seen how satisfaction turns God into a despot preoccupied with honour or debt rather than given over to companionship or reconciliation, how substitution transforms God into a monster dominated by legal procedure and open to child sacrifice rather than committed to being with us come what may; now in victory we see God reduced to open warfare and the perilous and hideous business of slaughter and bloodshed rather than patient loving-kindness. The route to eternal bliss and ultimate forgiveness, healing and reconciliation cannot run through merciless death-dealing and the exaltation of violence. To say otherwise is either to say God *has* to take this route, which heralds the defeat of God's sovereignty, or that God *wants* to take this route, which neuters God's goodness. These are intolerable prices to pay for a confidence that God will in the end prevail.

We can, should and must require all understandings of what is taking place on Good Friday to adhere to the principle that God's means and God's ends are identical. It's not a fanciful ideal: it's an absolutely incontrovertible requirement. If you're pondering and recalling and reflecting that aspects of some or all of the foregoing theories have seemed to you unsatisfactory, incomplete, problematic, or downright immoral, I'd like to suggest that this is the fundamental reason why. The problem with the historic atonement theories is centrally that in their assumption that our human problem is sin and death, and their desperate desire to narrate Good Friday as the way God fixes our sin and death problem, they decentre God, instrumentalise Christ and make the story about us, while moreover they distort the character of God to ensure God can achieve this human-centred goal. If the historic theories have left you troubled, you were right to be troubled. They're seriously

troubling. In our last half hour together, I want to show how a more faithful description of what is actually happening on Good Friday can recentre the story on God, redescribe the central human predicament, and ensure that God's means and God's ends remain identical not just throughout Good Friday, but throughout existence and eternity itself.

Christ Unites Us with the Father

As we've seen, one recurrent problem with historic atonement theories is their narrowness of context. They restrict Jesus' role to his death, they make his life irrelevant, they ignore the resurrection, they airbrush Israel out of the story. So the place to begin in giving a richer account is with context. The historic atonement theories have at best an abbreviated story that stretches from fall to cross – from the first Adam, who eats from the tree, to the second Adam, who dies on the tree. Eastern Orthodoxy maintains a fuller narrative begins with creation and ends with the Last Day. But I want to go further still: to begin with the Trinity and end with heaven. I want you to imagine an hourglass, with an upper level and a lover level and an aperture that connects them. The lower level I call essence. It's where the persons of the Trinity dwell together forever. The Trinity decides, before there was such a thing as time, for there to be something temporary called existence, and to relate to that existence personally and tenderly, in companionship and love. And so the upper level comes to be, called existence, and at the same time the aperture between the upper and lower levels: that aperture is called Jesus, who is fully of essence, eternal and divine, but also fully of existence, human and temporal. This the incarnation preceded creation in the heart of God. The incarnation was not God's response to the fall: the incarnation was always in the DNA of God.

But existence is by nature temporary. It will come to an end. Yet God is so committed to existence that God resolves ultimately to draw existence into essence – where existence will retain its contingent nature, but will be fully and unalterably embraced by God's everlasting love. Creation will be with God, just as, in the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are with one another. When Jesus comes among us, he's not responding to a crisis, he's embodying the fulness of the Trinity's relationship with creation – of essence's connection with existence. Being with is the nature of God, the reason for creation, the purpose of the incarnation, and our ultimate destiny with God

in heaven. But being with is also the dynamic at the heart of the Old Testament. God calls Abraham so that Abraham's descendants will be with God, in the three most characteristic forms that takes: covenant, community and communion. Before Jesus appears, covenant, community and communion are the closest forms of being with that humankind can know in existence. Humankind becomes obsessed with two kinds of its own limitation – sin and death; but the truth is, limitation is inherent in created existence, and our understandable wish to overcome limitation is deep down a desire to overcome our nature as creatures and pass through to essence without Jesus' help; or put another way, to have essence without God, without relationship; without being with.

In fact, our true human predicament is not limitation but isolation. We are isolated because our relationships with God, ourselves, one another and the creation have all foundered. And this is our predicament; because the flourishing of these relationships is precisely the reason for creation and the purpose of incarnation. If you think our struggle is to overcome limitation, other human beings are little more than potential partners in a larger quest. But if you think our human predicament is isolation, then being with is not only the goal but also the route there. Flawed as existence is by its struggle to be with, God is incarnate in Jesus and we behold God's glory, full of grace and truth. In Jesus we discover that the heart of God is being with; but we also discover that our *route* to the heart of God is being with. Jesus is a Jew and thus validates God's story of covenant, community and communion with Israel; but Jesus is also God, and thus embodies God's promise to be with us always, not just in existence but into essence. The incarnate Jesus not only affirms God's original purpose to be with us in existence, but anticipates God's ultimate purpose to draw us into essence and never not be with us.

In his ministry Jesus shows the full extent of what being with means. He is with his near circle, intimately. He is with those excluded from society, and thus models the radical and transformative quality of being with. He is with the authorities, and demonstrates how being with can be uncomfortable when confronted with hostility. Then he faces the crisis of being with: he sets his face toward Jerusalem, the city in which the temple represents Israel's faith that God is with, but where the authorities and the Romans evidence likely the cost of being with.

At this point recall the witness of Alexei Navalny. Navalny made his name in Russia as a lawyer and anticorruption activist. He became too well known to

be taken down by Putin's government, but too troublesome to ignore. So he was pinged with a series of spurious charges. But he continued to denounce the government as a party of crooks and thieves. In August 2020 he was poisoned with a Novichok nerve agent. He was medically evacuated to Germany while his life lay in the balance. Yet in January 2021, certain of the fate that would await him, he returned to Russia. He was immediately detained, imprisoned, recharged, and taken to a prison in the Arctic Circle, where on February 16 this year he died, probably violently and deliberately at the hands of his guards. The question many asked was, 'What possessed him to return to Russia in 2021, when he knew and everyone knew what would follow?' There can be only one answer: there was no Alexei Navalny that was not committed to being with Russia. Not to have returned would have been to have denied himself, to have abandoned who he was.

It was the same for Jesus going up to Jerusalem. A whole host of associations have gathered around this moment – of the Passover lamb, of the sacrifice that took away sins, the scapegoat that took on the evil of the world, of the fish that surprised the serpent, of the noble friend who took the place of the one justly condemned; but the only one that finally matters is this. If Jesus, walking the via dolorosa, had said, 'D'you know what… I don't fancy it. Can we not do this?' everything in existence and essence would have been different. See how for the historic atonement theories it would have been fine: he could have repaid a debt, stood in our place in the lawcourt, reincorporated Adam's failure or conquered death the following day. But if you believe the whole purpose and destiny of existence is for God to be with us in Christ, Jesus turning round on the via dolorosa would be catastrophic beyond description. It would go against the Trinity's DNA. We would never know for sure who God was: and nor would God.

And see how any idea that this was all a finely worked plan, whispered in Jesus' ear before the annunciation like a football substitute receiving the new formation from the manager before coming onto the field, unravels the whole character of what's happening. Jesus faces true despair on the cross. He experiences the isolation that humankind has brought on itself, and in his case it's even more ghastly: he's isolated from the Father, who seems to have forsaken him. He must choose between being with us and being with the Father. He chooses us. The Father meanwhile must choose between letting Jesus be with us or drawing Jesus back into the Trinity. Both are terrible choices, because they jeopardise the integrity of the Trinity: but there's no

way for God to continue to be God without the commitment to be with costing not less than everything. This then is what is taking place on Good Friday: we behold Jesus, embodying the Trinity's eternal commitment to be with us, becoming isolated from the Father. Agony of agony: a rupture in the Trinity; a cross in the heart of God.

We began the day knowing that the coinherence of the Trinity was unbreakable, but wondering whether the gulf between us and God, let alone one another, was unbridgeable. We end the day knowing that Jesus' commitment to be with us unbreakable, but wondering whether the rupture between Jesus and the Father is unbridgeable. It is the most shuddering feeling we could ever have in our lives: not just that we are mortal, or those we cherish and adore are mortal and fallible; but that somehow, mysteriously, appallingly, fearfully, the integrity of the Trinity might be lost, potentially forever. It is a truly awesome moment, to which no description could do justice. And we stay in that place for 36 hours.

But then we realise, just like in a well-crafted novel, that we've forgotten about the Holy Spirit. At his death Jesus says, 'Father into your hands I commend my Spirit.' See what he's doing: at the moment of his rupture with the Father, he's affirming that the Holy Spirit still unites them. And it's this same Holy Spirit that enlivens Jesus in the tomb, rolls away the stone, and restores Jesus to relationship with the Father and reunion with Mary Magdalene and the apostles. Recall how in the garden Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, 'I have not yet ascended to my Father' – thus announcing the reunion of the Son with the Father. Being with, the purpose of incarnation and creation, the destiny of us all with God forever, is affirmed and reiterated and comprehensively embodied. No more we doubt thee. At the Ascension Jesus goes to be with the Father and at Pentecost the Holy Spirit empowers us to be with Jesus, with one another and with the creation until existence ends and we are drawn back into being with God forever.

See how this story avoids all the pitfalls of the historic theories. It centres God, not us, because from beginning to end it's a story about what God desires and how God pursues that desire. It's not a story of deficit and scarcity but one of God's constant more: more commitment, more revelation, more trust, more faithfulness, more love. It doesn't proclaim a victory for whose tangible evidence we subsequently look in vain. It doesn't make God subject to some arbitrary law or self-serving code of honour. It doesn't turn God into a tyrant or monster or banker or judge. And most of all it portrays a God whose ends

and whose means are identical. The whole Christian story is one long unfurling of being with. Step one: God's DNA as Trinity is for Father, Son and Spirit to be with one another. Step two: creation happens for God to be with us in Christ. Step three: God's ultimate purpose is to be with us and for us to be with ourselves, one another and the renewed creation forever. Step four: all this focuses down precisely on the moment of the cross, when it could all go wrong, it could all be jettisoned, it could all be lost, in God and in us – and yet, at indescribable cost, and yet with pure constancy of character, Jesus loves us to the end – the end of his agony, and the purpose of all things. It's not the atonement: it's the re-with-ment.

That's what's happening on Good Friday. We don't need those theories that distort, decentre, and devalue God. Instead we have a story that has room for us, flawed and feckless as we are, transformed by God's being with us into the constant and faithful companionship to which God calls us. Love to the loveless shown that we might lovely be. That's why we rightly proclaim it, 'love so amazing, so divine.' That's why it demands our soul, our life, our all.