1

The Ransom to Satan

Origins 1: The Context

THE RANSOM-TO-SATAN THEORY AROSE FROM a profound awareness of evil. Not only were Christians, until 313 CE,[1] being systematically persecuted but, as McDonald observes:

> The condition of the Gentile world made such notions as bondage and release, captivity and ransom, more tragically familiar. . . . Everywhere economic terror and spiritual fear reigned and intertwined to make human life doubly miserable. Many were enduring bondage and slavery physically, but all were caught up in them spiritually.[2]

So conscious were the early Christians of the pervasiveness of Satanically inspired evil (see the book of Revelation) that they developed strong dualistic tendencies: God on one side, the devil on the other, and no neutral ground in between. This dualism in turn was fed by the now-thriving gnostic theories that were proving so popular as to almost swamp

---

1. This was the date of the so-called "Edict of Milan," which, among other things, secured a benevolent attitude towards Christians throughout the two halves of the Roman Empire (West and East).

2. McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ*, 138. Specifically, he cites "marauding gangs" who roamed about "capturing travelers and demanding payment for their release." McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ*, 139.

the church.[3] Gnosticism is described aptly by Franks as "like the cuckoo in the sparrow's nest."[4]

Gnosticism, a sprawling aggregate of somewhat extravagant beliefs, is divided into certain distinct groups. Grensted[5] claims two types—Valentinian and Marcionite—as the true source of the ransom-to-Satan theory. These types of Gnosticism tended to teach something like this: humankind is under the Demiurge. Some humans have the spark of a heavenly nature, and the goal is to free this spiritual inner self by means of enlightenment (gnosis). The inner self must be released from its bondage to matter. How? The revelation of the Logos from the heavenly world. The Logos, an important Greek philosophical idea, was the very mind of the supreme God, spoken out into the world. He alone could grant enlightenment to truly spiritual people and free them from their false attachment to all things material. But, even those who come from the heavenly world, such as the Logos, must not ignore the power of the Demiurge. The Demiurge was the evil demi-god that created this stultifying, unspiritual thing called matter in the first place. Further solution: the Logos must conform outwardly to material conditions. He must not reveal who he really is—like a king in disguise. Thus, the Demiurge is deceived by this outward conformity by which a totally cosmic Logos takes on the *appearance* of physical form in order to defeat the Demiurge and free all those that have the inner spark to be able to live a more spiritual existence.

The missing link between these gnostic ideas and the early Christian doctrine of a Ransom to Satan is a very surprising one. It appears that the very person who was one of the most outspoken early critics of Gnosticism actually borrowed quite extensively from their ideas. His name was Irenaeus (130–c.202 CE). Rashdall commented aptly on what was happening here: "Irenaeus simply substituted the devil for the Demiurge."[6] And even before Irenaeus came along, writers such as Justin Martyr were equating Jesus with the Greek Logos. Apart from these two slight changes to the leading characters, the drama remains very similar to the gnostic one. Thus, as the theory developed in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, Christ is

3. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement*, 34–35.

4. Franks, *A History of the Work of Christ* I, 16.

5. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement*, 34–35.

6. Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology*, 245. Teselle, likewise is not shy of attributing to anti-heretical writers such as Theophilus, Irenaeus, and Hyppolytus the nasty habit of appropriating the very ideas they were writing against: TeSelle, "The Cross as Ransom," 158.

seen to take the form of a frail human delivered into the hands of the devil without the devil fully understanding that he had bitten off more than he could chew. He is deceived by outward appearances. The result is the devil's defeat and the liberation of Christ's people.

Franks points to the Marcionite gnostics as the first to use 1 Cor 2:8 (that those who crucified the Lord of glory would not have done so had they known who he was) as a New Testament precedent for the concept that the true God misleads the devil, a passage that would later be quoted very freely in patristic writings in support of the idea that God deceived the devil.[7] In fact, all forms of Gnosticism held in common the notion that Christ only *seemed* to be crucified. Basilides, a significant gnostic leader, has the real Christ standing by laughing while Simon of Cyrene is crucified by mistake due to Christ having engineering a deceptive change in Simon's appearance.[8] So the element of deception, of those crucifying Jesus being misled by appearances, is a prominent gnostic teaching that was, it seems, allowed to flow into the mainstream teaching of the church.[9]

Origins 2: Emergence

This way of looking at the atonement was soon favored by most of the Fathers, but in varying forms, some more crude than others. Irenaeus, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine[10] each develop the ransom-to-Satan theory in cruder and cruder forms. Two elements emerged progressively, especially from Origen onwards: one, as we have already seen, was that God deceived the devil and the other was that the devil's rights over humans were legitimate.

Irenaeus only tentatively introduced the idea that the ransom spoken of in the New Testament was in fact paid to the devil, and did not emphasize the idea that the devil had any legitimate rights over humans. Here is the very first suggestion of the theory. "Apostasy" here refers to Satan:

7. Franks, *A History of the Work of Christ* I, 15.

8. According to Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1:349.

9. Likewise, TeSelle believes that the ransom motif probably arose from within various heterodox groups that were preoccupied with the idea of Christ in disguise: TeSelle, "The Cross as Ransom," 157.

10. Augustine won't be discussed here, but see his *On the Trinity* 4.14.14; 5.13.19; and 4.14.18–19.

> And since the apostasy held unjust sway over us, and, though naturally we belonged to God Almighty, had estranged us from Him unnaturally, making us his own disciples, the all-powerful Word of God, who lacks not in His own righteousness, justly turned against that same apostasy, redeeming from it His own not by force, after the manner in which the devil had held sway over us at the first, greedily seizing what was not his own, but by persuasion, even as it befitted God to take what He wished by persuading and not by imposing force, so that there should neither be any infringement of justice, nor should God's ancient creation perish utterly.[11]

Irenaeus is clear that the devil is a usurper, having no rights. God must be in total control. Yet even with the usurper, God observes fair play.[12] Also, and crucially for recent feminist re-appropriations, Irenaeus "avoids mere external compulsion or blind force, even where He might legitimately be expected to use it."[13] Origen then takes Irenaeus' idea and adds his own emphasis:

> If then we were "bought with a price," as Paul asserts, we were doubtless bought from one whose servants we were, who also named what price he would for releasing those whom he held from his power. Now it was the devil that held us, to whose side we had been drawn away by our sins. He asked, therefore, as our price the blood of Christ.[14]

Of note is the addition, in Origen's *Commentary on Matthew*, of the notion that the devil was deceived in the transaction:

> The Evil One had been deceived and led to suppose that he was capable of mastering the soul, and did not see that to hold Him involved a trial of strength greater than he could successfully undertake.[15]

---

11. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V.1.1. "A certain justice forbade God to employ the methods characteristic of the devil." Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement*, 36.

12. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption*, 54.

13. Ibid.

14. Origen, *On Romans* II.13. Cited in Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement*, 37.

15. On Matt 25:1, 8. This is the earliest occurrence of the notion, aside from a passing reference in Ignatius' *Letter to the Ephesians*, 19. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption*, 55, n. 3.

In Gregory of Nyssa' *Great Catechetical Oration*, the whole idea of deceiving the devil seems to take over:

> 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 Deity might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh.[16]

The notion of needing to overtly deceive the devil increases in proportion to the perceived legitimacy of the devil's hold over man. The picture becomes progressively more dualistic: God only finally succeeds because of his superior intellect, and is unable to rightfully use his absolute power.

So, the ransom-to-Satan theory would appear to be the product firstly of the prevalence of gnostic beliefs. This naturally gave rise to the idea of a deception surrounding the death of Christ. Secondly, and rooted in a highly dualistic mindset that accorded considerable power to the devil/ Demiurge, the idea soon took shape that the devil *must* be deceived in this way. His rights were inviolable, even to the supreme God. Freedom for man under Satan's thralldom could only be bought, not taken. Thirdly, the Gospels of Mark (see Mark 10:45) and Matthew (see Matt 20:28) and most of the letters at that time attributed to Paul (see 1 Tim 2:6) were in wide circulation, and these speak of a ransom, though are silent on the matter of to whom the ransom was paid. This silence was doubtless very tempting to fill, though, were it not for the preceding two factors, it is doubtful that such an elaborate and successful theory of the atonement would ever have developed as a result of this temptation alone.

What is for certain is that the ransom-to-Satan way of understanding the atonement became so widespread that, by the time of the medieval period, it was to provoke Anselm into writing his *Cur Deus Homo?* out of sheer irritation with it. The longstanding popularity of the ransom-to-Satan theory is difficult to explain fully. It could be that the theory was needed theologically. The recapitulation theory (which we shall consider in the next chapter) made the death of Jesus climactic but dispensable. Some additional theory was needed that made the death of Jesus actually necessary. It is this theological necessity that possibly explains the survival for 900 years of a theory that seems quite flawed.

Aside from the medieval preoccupation with the harrowing of hell and with all things demonological, there followed, in the wake of Anselm, what

---

16. Gregory of Nyssa, *Great Catechism*, 24. He defends the divine deception with the claim that the end justifies the means: *Great Catechism* 5:495.

7

appears to be a great silence about the atonement themes that the Fathers had been so fond of, unless one concedes Aulén's point that Martin Luther principally held to a *Christus Victor* view.[17] At any rate, by the nineteenth century, it seems clear that the battle lines had fallen in a way that divided objective theories from subjective theories, satisfaction-substitution interpretations from morally transformative solutions, and, until Aulén came along, totally ignoring the third option of *Christus Victor.* To him we now turn.

Re-Appropriations 1: Mid-Twentieth-Century Forays

Aulén's Christus Victor

By the 1930s, while Europe was recovering from unprecedented military bloodshed and careering into unknown new worlds fashioned by increasingly powerful dictators and their ideologies, the patristic ways of looking at the cross took on a new value to the Swedish professor and bishop Gustav Aulén (1879–1977).[18] In 1930, he produced a book that was translated into English in 1931 under the title *Christus Victor.*[19] Ever since then, any view of Christ's death that holds it was primarily a victory over spiritual powers has tended to be termed a *Christus Victor* (Victorious Christ) view. Aulén essentially rewrote church history in favor of his view, claiming that it always was the "classic" view of the atonement. To argue that this was the case from the Fathers was straightforward enough. But to get around the overtly penal views of the atonement held during the Reformation, he had to claim that Luther himself held the *Christus Victor* view, and that, beginning with Luther's successor Melanchthon, this had been ignored by subsequent advocates of penal substitution. Aulén, not surprisingly, calls

17. John Calvin's Christology is also said to contain *Christus Victor* elements: Peterson, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Atonement*, 46–54.

18. Postwar too: "In the wake of Auschwitz and Hiroshima the notion that malevolent forces twist and pervert relations among nations and persons, spawning countless forms of sin, began to sound strangely plausible." Finger, "Pilgram Marpeck and the Christus Victor Motif," 54.

19. Originally titled, *Den kristna försoningstanken* (The Christian Idea of the Atonement), this was published in 1930 in the wake his series of lectures that were delivered in Upsala that same year. The English translation appeared in 1931: *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement.*

into question all subsequent scholarship, urging a return to the classic view of the Fathers and Luther.

Serious theological reflection on the patristic doctrine of the atonement dates back to the origins of the discipline of historical theology itself, with a number of historical theologians including significant discussion of the origins and development of the ransom to Satan,[20] culminating in 1919 with Hastings Rashdall writing one of the most scathing treatments of the ransom-to-Satan theory that would ever be written.[21] Complementing the offerings of the historical theology tradition came a serious treatment of the patristic theory from the Anglican Nathaniel Dimock.[22] The trio of British historians of the atonement: Franks,[23] Grensted,[24] and (much later) McDonald,[25] summarize helpfully the findings of the earlier Continental historians of dogma, but add nothing new to the discussion. The contributions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were important in producing a body of critical reflection on the history of the theory sufficient to bring it to the attention of a new generation of theologians at mid century.

Not until Bishop Gustav Aulén's Olaus Petri Lectures of 1930 was there any serious attempt at a contemporary re-appropriation of the doctrine. Until him, the ransom-to-Satan is treated entirely as a historical curio. Further treatments of the doctrine that were of this kind would yet appear,[26] but it seems that there was no going back from this point. Within a few decades, discussions in articles of the *Christus Victor* model from a great

---

20. Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* Vol. 1 (Originally 1898) English translation: *Text-Book of the History of Dogma*; Harnack, *History of Dogma* Vol. 2, 367–68; Loofs, *Leitfaden zum Studien der Dogmengeschichte*; Riviere, *Le dogme de la Redemption*.

21. Rashdall, *The Christian Idea of Atonement*.

22. Dimock, *The Doctrine of the Death of Christ*.

23. Franks, *A History of the Work of Christ* I.

24. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement*.

25. McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ*.

26. Most notably, Turner, *Patristic Doctrine of the Atonement*.

variety of perspectives appeared,[27] especially after the American edition of the book went to press in 1951.[28]

In 1953, Dillistone[29] persuasively added his advocacy of a *Christus Victor* approach as the one most in line with the general tenor of salvation history in both Old and New Testaments. John Macquarrie also lent his weight.[30] Volume 2 of Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology,* appearing in 1957, broke new ground in re-appropriating *Christus Victor* categories in the service of his existentialist vision of the Christian faith.[31] Oscar Cullman also gave some support.[32]

27. Firstly, and not surprisingly given Aulen's radical reinterpretation of Luther, there came a Lutheran response in 1957: Evenson, "A Critique of Aulen's *Christus Victor Concordia Theological* Monthly," (and later, in 1972, Peters, "The Atonement in Anselm and Luther, Second Thoughts about Aulen's *Christus Victor*,"); then, in 1961, from an Anglo-Catholic perspective, came Fairweather, "Incarnation and Atonement: An Anselmian Response to Aulen's *Christus Victor*." In 1975 there appeared a study around *Christus Victor* and J. S. Bach: Naylor, "Bach's Interpretation of the Cross" (and later, Stapert, "Christus Victor: Bach's *St. John Passion*,"). In 1979, *Christus Victor* and youth work were juxtaposed: Espy, "In Celebration of Amsterdam 1939." In 1982 came a Roman Catholic response: Heath, "Salvation: A Roman Catholic Perspective," and from an Anglican perspective came Loewe, "Irenaeus' Soteriology: *Christus Victor* Revisited" (1985), and more recently, Ovey, "Appropriating Aulén? Employing *Christus Victor* Models of the Atonement" (2010). Colin Gunton engaged with the model in his "*Christus Victor* Revisited: A Study in Metaphor and the Transformation of Meaning" (1985) and in his book *The Actuality of Atonement* (1988), especially 57–58. Rather more recently has come a series of Mennonite responses: Weaver, "*Christus Victor*, Ecclesiology and Christology" (1994), and Weaver, "Some Theological Implications of *Christus Victor*" (1994), and, in response to Weaver, Thomas Finger's, "*Christus Victor* and the Creeds: Some Historical Considerations" (1998), Finger, "Pilgrim Marpek and the *Christus Victor* Motif" (2004), and Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology* (2004). From a Nazarene perspective came Greathouse, "Sanctfication and the *Christus Victor* Motif in Wesleyan Theology" (2003). In 2005, Brad Harper explored the potential place of *Christus Victor* within contemporary culture: "*Christus Victor*, Postmodernism and the Shaping of Atonement Theology." Finally, 2008 brought a Brethren response to Weaver's particular version of *Christus Victor*: Eisenbise. "Resurrection as Victory? The eschatological implications of J. Denny Weaver's 'Narrative *Christus Victor*' Model of the Atonement."

28. Aulen, *Christus Victor: A Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*. New York: Macmillan, 1951. Boersma goes as far as to say that the "earlier publication of Aulén's work in 1931 was an isolated occurrence." Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, 194, n. 52.

29. Dillistone, "A Biblical and Historical Appraisal of Theories of the Atonement," 185–95.

30. Macquarrie, "Demonology and the Classic Idea of the Atonement," 5–6, 60–63.

31. Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* Vol. II, 197–98.

32. Cullman, *Christ and Time*, 193.

Next, in apparent isolation from the still growing *Christus Victor* debate, there arose within the Neo-Pentecostalism of the 1970s, an extraordinarily dramatic and, at times, grotesque view of the atonement that utilized the patristic belief in a descent into Hades as a key component in the defeat of Satan.[33] The *Christus Victor* view was also found to speak to liberation theology better than other models of the atonement.[34] Darby Kathleen Ray,[35] taking her cue from Paul Fiddes,[36] adapted and demythologized the ransom to Satan for the feminist argument. She was followed by J. Denny Weaver, who, during the 1990s, began to recognize the nonviolent appeal of the model. He applied a similar re-appropriation to black and womanist contexts, culminating in his *The Nonviolent Atonement*.[37] Eugene TeSelle, in his short but significant work, also retrieved the model in the interests of social and political justice.[38] More recently still, the emerging church movement favors a transition from penal substitution to *Christus Victor* as the preferred model.[39] Other evangelical responses have also continued to flow steadily.[40] It is to the first appearance of this new paradigm in modern theology that I will now turn in more detail.

Gunton's critique was among the more serious treatments.[41] He saw the following as a passage that captures the heart of Aulén's understanding of the *Christus Victor* view:

> This type of view may be described provisionally as the "dramatic." Its central theme 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

33. Analyzed most recently by Atkinson, "A Theological Appraisal of the Doctrine that Jesus Died Spiritually, as Taught by Kenyon, Hagin and Copeland."

34. Maimela, "The Atonement in the Context of Liberation Theology," 45–54.

35. Ray, *Deceiving the Devil: Atonement, Abuse and Ransom*. Similarly: Megill-Cobbler, "A Feminist Rethinking of Punishment Imagery in Atonement," 14–20.

36. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*.

37. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, see also his "Narrative *Christus Victor*: The Answer to Anselmian Atonement Violence."

38. TeSelle, "The Cross as Ransom," 147–70.

39. Greg Boyd, popular within the emerging church movement, is coauthor of Boyd, et al., *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, and *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict*. He has also named his ministry "Christus Victor Ministries."

40. Dembele, "Salvation as Victory"; Blocher, "Agnus Victor: The Atonement as Victory and Vicarious Punishment."

41. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, esp. 57–58.

mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him reconciles the world to Himself.[42]

Gunton's two main concerns are, firstly, that Aulén's view needs to be extended from a mythology of a past event into something of ongoing significance. Paul speaks of an ongoing life of victory that is available to believers (Rom 8:37). Aulén seems content with a mere "story of the gods."[43] However, in Aulén's defense, he claims in his closing paragraphs that his purpose in writing the book had not been "apologetic" but "historical."[44] He claims that his primary intention was not to advance the theory as something that should ongoingly inform contemporary praxis, though he clearly believed that it should. Aulén concludes thus:

> I am persuaded that no form of Christian teaching has any future before it except such as can keep steadily in view the reality of evil in the world, and go to meet the evil with a battle-song of triumph. Therefore I believe that the classic idea of the Atonement and of Christianity is coming back—that is to say, the genuine, authentic Christian faith.[45]

Secondly, according to Gunton, Aulén is too triumphalistic, not taking into account "the human and even tragic elements in the story."[46] These two observations, namely, that the model is too dualistic and mythological and, arising out of this very other worldliness of the theory, that it fails to acknowledge tragedy and suffering both in the gospel narrative itself and in human life generally, recur in the critiques surrounding *Christus Victor*. The prevalence of human suffering today provokes questions as to the nature of the alleged victory over evil. Yet, despite these obvious difficulties, this

---

42. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 20.

43. Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement*, 57.

44 Aulén's closing caveat does not appear to have been persuasive for most reviewers however, e.g., Boersma: "It is clear that Aulén feels that we need a return to the Christus Victor theme . . ." Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, 182, a fact that Boersma clearly agrees with: ibid., 181–82.

45. Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 176.

46. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, 58. He is similarly accused of being too "monergistic," making salvation into the work of God alone to the point of effectively denying the full humanity of Christ in docetic fashion: Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, 185, who also cites Fairweather, "Incarnation and Atonement: An Anselmian Response to Aulén's Christus Victor," 161–75, and Dembele, "Salvation as Victory," 65–66 in support. Boersma also calls for a more participatory element to Aulén's model: Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, 185.

approach is gaining popularity. The decline of Enlightenment naturalism is often named, and very plausibly, as a factor that has allowed a resurgence of interest in, and belief in, the existence of supernatural evil powers at work in the world.[47] This adds greatly to the credibility of a cosmic victory over such powers, however incomplete the mopping up operation.

Tillich's Christus Victor

Paul Tillich also would be among those who, mid-century, made some preliminary forays into a re-appropriation of the patristic model. This was not to say that Tillich was especially favorable to the patristic doctrine in its original forms; he describes Origen's depictions as "almost a comedy."[48] He understood the world of early Christianity to be one that was steeped in fear of demonic powers from which people were in need of liberation. Life was filled with a fear that he describes as existential estrangement: "Without the experience of the conquest of existential estrangement, the *Christus Victor* symbol never could have arisen either in Paul or in Origen."[49]

Tillich's analysis of *Christus Victor* as part of a conversation between the questions of philosophy and the answers of theology anticipate the very recent efforts on the part of emerging church advocates to re-contextualize the model within postmodernity.

Re-Appropriations 2: The Late Twentieth Century

Word of Faith Christus Victor

Fundamental to Word of Faith theology is the belief that man came under the authority of Satan at the fall. Salvation therefore, had to involve a decisive blow to Satan's dominion. The consequent re-titling of man with a renewed authority over creation, and over Satan himself, is commonly

---

47. Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, 193–94, who cites in support, Aulén, Christus Victor (1951 ed.), 7–15, Boyd, *God at War*, 61–72, and Dembele, "Salvation as Victory," 12. So Weaver, who notes that, "cosmic and demonic imagery" had been, "incompatible with a modern world view." Weaver, "Atonement for the NonConstantinian Church," 307.

48. Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol. II, 198.

49. Ibid.

appropriated via various spiritual warfare strategies.[50] However, the Word of Faith theory of the atonement goes significantly beyond this basic understanding and envisages a highly dramatic showdown between Jesus and the devil in hell.

William Atkinson's PhD is the first major analysis of the atonement in Word of Faith teaching.[51] As with all other aspects of Word of Faith teaching,[52] the genealogy of the Word of Faith view of the atonement is traceable to the nineteenth-century New England preacher and prolific writer, E. W. Kenyon.[53] He, in turn, appears to have been influenced at least by Irenaeus, and possibly by other patristic writings.[54] From Kenyon, Kenneth Hagin[55] and then Kenneth Copeland[56] derived all their leading ideas. At the heart of the Word of Faith concept of the atonement is the "Jesus Died Spiritually" (JDS) idea, a doctrine so controversial as to have aroused some opposition from within the Word of Faith movement itself.[57] On this view, the substitutionary nature of Christ's death is taken to dramatic extremes, with the notion being introduced that, if the sin-nature in man is at its core satanic, then Christ must have taken on himself a satanic nature on the cross.[58] This was what caused him to die spiritually, that is, to be cut

50. Scholarly treatments of spiritual warfare include: Carr, *Angels and Principalities*; Wink, *Naming the Powers*; Walker, *Enemy Territory*; Wright, *The Fair Face of Evil*; Guelich, "Spiritual Warfare: Jesus, Paul and Peretti"; Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*; Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 203–15; Walker, "The Devil You Think You Know," *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare*; Ellis, *Raising the Devil*.

51. William Atkinson, "Theological Appraisal." It is also available as a book: *The Death of Jesus: A Pentecostal Investigation*. An earlier version of part of the work has also appeared in the *Evangelical Review of Theology*: Atkinson, "The Nature of the Crucified Christ in Word-Faith Teaching."

52. See my "What the Faith Teachers Mean by 'Faith'," for an analysis of the faith concept.

53. Three books of his are significant: *What Happened from the Cross to the Throne*, *Identification: A Romance in Redemption*, and, *The Wonderful Name of Jesus*.

54. Atkinson, "Theological Appraisal," 227–28.

55. See his, *The Name of Jesus*, *Authority of the Believer*, and his *El Shaddai*.

56. Especially his *Jesus Died Spiritually* and his *Jesus in Hell*.

57. Freeman, *Did Jesus Die Spiritually? Exposing the JDS Heresy*.

58. Man apparently must, "partake either of God's nature or of Satan's nature," Kenyon, *The Bible in the Light of Our Redemption*, 28. See also, Dan McConnell's appraisal: "Spiritual death is thus 'a nature,' leading to a 'new Satanic creation.'" McConnell, *The Promise of Health and Wealth*, 118, citing Kenyon, *The Bible in the Light of Our Redemption*, 28. Likewise Hagin: "Spiritual death means having Satan's nature." Hagin, *Redemption*, 29.

off from God. But not only was he cut off from God, he descended into hell, where, as the bearer now of a satanic nature, he was required to "serve time."[59] Satan mistakenly thought he had the Son of God in his grasp. I will let Hagin tell the rest:

> I'm certain that all the devils of hell raced up and down the back alleys of hell rejoicing, "We've got the Son of God in our hands! We've defeated God's purpose!" But on that third morning, the God who is more than enough said, "It is enough! He has satisfied the claims of justice."[60]

Copeland is still more theatrical as he describes the climactic moment:

> the power of the Almighty God began to stream down from heaven and break the locks off the gates of hell. . . . Jesus began to stir. The power of heaven penetrated and re-created His spirit. He rose up and in a moment of super conquest, He kicked the daylights out of the devil and all those who were doing his work. . . . Then Jesus came up out of that place of torment in triumph, went back through the tomb, into His body, and walked out of there.[61]

This version of events clearly falls within the *Christus Victor* tradition, but the extent to which it resembles the patristic ransom-to-Satan theories has been the subject of some debate.[62] The dissimilarities, according to Atkinson, are these:

1. Nowhere in these writings is the atonement referred to as a ransom. There is no concept that anything was paid to the devil. Instead, as we saw from the extracts, it is God's justice that is satisfied in true penal substitutionary fashion.

59. Fred Price, writing in his *Ever Increasing Faith Messenger*. The most reliable citation of this seems to be that it was June 1980 (page 7), quoted in McConnell, *The Promise of Health and Wealth*, 120. Original source not found. The saying attributed to him is this: "Do you think that the punishment for our sin was to die on a cross? If that were the case, the two thieves could have paid our price. No, the punishment was to go into hell itself and to serve time in hell separated from God." Of some interest on this subject is Grudem, "He Did Not Descend into Hell."

60. Hagin, *El Shaddai*, 7.

61. Copeland, "The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail," 4–7. I am indebted to Atkinson for both of these extraordinary extracts.

62. According to Atkinson, those who stress the similarities include: Perriman, *Faith, Health and Prosperity*, 115; McConnell, *The Promise of Health and Wealth*, 119, 125–26; Smail et al., "'Revelation Knowledge' and Knowledge of Revelation"; DeArteaga, *Quenching the Spirit*, 240, 270–71; Spencer, *Heresy Hunters*, 102. Emphasizing the differences there is a mere footnote in Hannegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis*, 395 n. 2.

2. The location of Christ's victory over the devil is hell. In the patristic theories, there is a descent into hell, which is understood to be plundered by Jesus, yet the moment of victory occurs on the cross itself.[63]

Feminist Christus Victor: Darby Kathleen Ray

One of the biggest surprises has been that a view of the cross that is so triumphalistic should make its appeal within the last twenty years to feminism. Darby Kathleen Ray has been the strongest advocate of this feminist re-appropriation of the patristic view of the atonement.[64] Its attraction to her appears to be the fact that, on this view—and this is especially noticeable in Irenaeus, whom she references a lot—God demonstrates for us the ultimate nonviolent resistance of evil. Even though God is almighty, he chooses, Narnia style,[65] to enter into negotiations with the enemy and set humankind free from the power of evil by observing the rights ceded to it by human sin.

Even the later developments of the ransom theory from Origen and Gregory of Nyssa onwards, in which the deception of Satan is overtly included, seem not to present a stumbling block to Ray. It is in such patristic authors that the metaphors so despised by Rashdall appear: Christ is the bait concealing the hook of divinity that catches the satanic fish (Gregory of Nyssa's *Greater Catechism*, 24), or the unjust crucifixion of Christ is bait on a divine mousetrap that snaps shut with Christ's vindication (Augustine's *Sermon*, 263), or the satanic bird is caught in the net of Christ's passion (Gregory the Great's *Commentary on Job*, 33.15).[66] Yet these images seem not to present a stumbling block to Ray. She claims that, "All were metaphorical attempts to express the conviction that the powers of evil were

---

63. Atkinson, "Theological Appraisal," 225–26.

64. She is at the moderate end of a scale that, at its most radical, despairs of any existing soteriology that is relevant to women: Storkey, "Atonement and Feminism," 227–28. From a similar perspective, see also Houts, "Classical Atonement Imagery," 1–6. Darby Kathleen Ray is given a very positive review by evangelicals Joel Green and Mark Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 171–83. Much cooler is Boersma's treatment in *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, 196–99. Besides feminism, Ray also speaks to Latin American liberation issues with eloquence: "Together [Christ conquering and conquered], these two sides of the same christological coin feed the violence of the few and the passivity of the many." Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 88.

65. See Charles Taliaferro, "A Narnian Theory of the Atonement."

66. Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology*, 241–310.

defeated at the moment of their apparent victory, and that, paradoxically, Christ was triumphant at the moment of his defeat on the cross."[67]

Ray's crucial move as she attempts to retrieve the patristic theory is to demythologize and broaden the concept of a ransom paid to the devil into a ransom paid to evil. She takes her cue from Paul Fiddes' work, *Past Event and Present Salvation.*[68] Fiddes wrestles with the question of just how, in the face of so much present day evil, we can claim that a comprehensive victory has been won, or even that a turning point in the war has been reached, as had been Aulén's claim. He begins to answer this by more clearly identifying the "tyrants" that held humankind so that we then understand in what realm, from God's viewpoint, that victory is meant to have been won. For Fiddes, there are three tyrants, all taken from Paul's letters: sin, the law, and death. And it is this move away from a victory over demons into a theory resting on a victory over less mythological and more specific evils that seems to have caught Ray's eye.

However, her broadening of the concept into a general evil threatens to lead her into a corner where she could be accused, in an age rampant with evil, of a totally fictitious victory. This she anticipates by emphasizing the volitional element. We have all given evil permission to reign whenever we have failed to resist it. In the case of women, this is the failure to assert oneself, which is understood to be just as serious a sin as the more masculine sin of pride that traditional depictions of the cross are intended to address. It is not want of humility, she argues, that is the thing that needs atoning for in women—at least not typically. It is want of self-assertion. She cites a Methodist set prayer that emphasizes obedience, saying, "Prayers such as this one, though seemingly innocuous, inscribe their petitioners with an ideology of quietude that treats resistance to authority as a shameful transgression."[69] Using this female kind of sin, on the one hand, and the male kind of sin, "the unjust or avaricious use of power,"[70] on the other,

---

67. Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 121.

68. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, especially 115–24.

69. Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 25. Storkey sums up the view of many feminist theologians in saying that all that is involved with Christ being a sacrificial victim "leaves women anchored in their own victim status which is justified and romanticized as identification with the Savior." Storkey, "Atonement and Feminism," 231. In a similar vein is Rita Nakashima Brock: "The shadow of the punitive father must always lurk behind the atonement. He haunts images of forgiving grace." Brock, "And a Little Child will lead Us," 53.

70. Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 121.

as definitive of evil, she is then in a position to disable the main objection to the ransom to Satan theory, namely that it presupposes that the devil has rights. In her version, there is no devil and there are no rights to bestow upon him. Evil, however, has been given great power by both men and women, such that it "seems to take on a life of its own."[71] We have given evil its rights by not resisting it. Evil is thus depersonalized, but then begins to be re-personified as a power that, in citing Irenaeus, "transgresses all boundaries."[72] Her ideas are summed up in the following appraisal of Irenaeus. She agrees with his conviction that:

> in the person of Jesus, God has acted not only to reveal the true nature of evil but also to decenter and delegitimate its authority by luring it into exposing its own moral bankruptcy and thus defeating itself, hence opening up the possibility for human beings to escape enslavement to evil.[73]

She identifies the weaknesses of the patristic view as the following: firstly, it is too dualistic. By this she means that it implies a moral, over-simplistic, self-justifying dualism that demonizes certain groups. Definitions of good and evil are too clear-cut.[74] Secondly, it is too cosmic. Humans are passive and irresponsible. It is susceptible of a comic-book superhero interpretation.[75] Lastly, it is too triumphalistic. The patristic view portrays the victory as a done deal, whereas, "the suggestion that good has defeated evil, even from an eschatological perspective, seems impossible to confirm."[76]

Broadening the Appeal: Wink, Weaver, and Nonviolent Atonement

Pre-dating Ray, but not significantly influencing atonement theory until more recently, has been the celebrated work of Walter Wink. His most influential work was his *The Powers* trilogy,[77] which was a ground-breaking

---

71. Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 122.

72. Ibid., 123, endnote 13, citing *Against Heresies* V 21.2 and V 21.112.

73. Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 123. Similarly, TeSelle gives an important insight into what the cross does to the abuse of power. He defines the abuse of power as "overstepping one's authority and consequently being discredited." TeSelle, "The Cross as Ransom," 161.

74. Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 126–27.

75. Ibid., 126–28.

76. Ibid., 28.

77. *Naming the Powers* (1984), *Unmasking the Powers* (1986), *Engaging the Powers* (1992).

re-assessment of the Pauline concept of principalities and powers. With Aulén having already used "powers" language in his work, and with New Testament demonology already having received fresh scholarly and popular attention, the stage was set for Wink's work to make a significant and lasting impact. The last book, *Engaging the Powers* (1992), the biggest and best of his trilogy, had an especially lasting impact upon North American theology. In America, the Historic Peace Churches,[78] in particular, have contributed a significant amount of literature that has at its heart a marriage between a Winkian view of satanic evil as systemic (that is, rooted in human systems, e.g., oppressive governments, multinational corporations, some forms of popular culture), and a *Christus Victor* view of atonement. The *Christus Victor* approach has, for Peace Church scholars, the added appeal of being pre-Constantinian in origin, the advent of Christendom being seen as an especially disastrous turn of events by Christians within this tradition.

Wink himself portrayed the *Christus Victor* model as a nonviolent theory of the atonement that unmasks systemic evil:

> They scourged him with whips, but with each stroke of the lash their own legitimacy was laid open. They mocked him with a robe and a crown of thorns, spit on him, struck him on the head with a reed, and ridiculed him with the ironic ovation, "Hail, King of the Jews!"—not knowing that their acclamation would echo down the centuries. They stripped him naked and crucified him in humiliation, all unaware that this very act had stripped them of the last covering that disguised the towering wrongness of the whole way of living that their violence defended.[79]

The cross is thus "the ultimate paradigm of nonviolence."[80] The effect of this unmasking of systemic violence disseminates across the world, re-sensitizing humanity to its own propensities towards this kind of evil: "Killing Jesus was like trying to destroy a dandelion seed-head by blowing on it. It was like shattering a sun into a million fragments of light."[81] Wink is able to harmonize the gospel of the cross with the gospel of the kingdom: "The

---

78. Specifically these are the Mennonites, the Quakers (see Vail, "Theorising a Quaker View of the Atonement." George Fox is thought to have held to a *Christus Victor* view: 113; see also Freiday, "'Atonement' in Historical Perspective"), and the Church of the Brethren.

79. Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 139.

80. Ibid., 141.

81. Ibid., 143.

reign of God means the complete and definitive elimination of every form of violence between individuals and nations."[82] Here is how it works:

> Only by being driven out by violence could God signal to humanity that the divine is nonviolent and is antithetical to the Kingdom of Violence.[83]

And further:

> And because he was not only innocent, but the very embodiment of true religion, true law, and true order, this victim exposed their violence for what it was: not the defense of society, but an attack against God.[84]

Another writer who is attracted to the notion of nonviolent resistance in the patristic models is the Mennonite J. Denny Weaver.[85] In his work he takes up the cause not only of feminists but also of black[86] and womanist theologians. He also sides clearly with the primitivism of Anabaptist churchmanship by drawing parallels between the post-Christian West and the pre-Constantine church in which *Christus Victor* views of atonement held sway.[87]

His particular theory is, "narrative Christus Victor," by which he means, "Christus Victor depicted the realm of history."[88] Reflecting on the book of Revelation, he explains that narrative Christus Victor is, "The historical framework of emperors and the construct of church confronting

---

82. Ibid., 149.

83. Ibid., referencing Réné Girard, *Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World*, 129.

84. Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 140.

85. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*. This book is most rigorously critiqued from within the Mennonite movement by Peter Martens, "The Quest for an Anabaptist Atonement," 281–311.

86. See also James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 131–32. Black liberation theology seemingly frowns upon all models of the atonement, but least so when it comes to the patristic ransom approach: Maimela, "Atonement in the Context of Liberation Theology," 50. For an interesting discussion of the cross and African-American Christians from the lynching period onwards see Yong and Alexander, eds., *Afro-Pentecostalism*, chapter 6.

87. "It is the modern 'post-Christian generation' which has rediscovered Christus Victor. That is, the renewal of attention to this view of atonement has come at a time when the western world is starting to be aware of the disintegration of the Constantinian synthesis." Weaver, "Atonement for the NonConstantinian Church," 316.

88. Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 25.

empire."[89] He further claims that the Gospels fit Revelation in this regard, reinforcing this "universal and cosmic story of the confrontation of reign of God and rule of Satan."[90]

> Narrative Christus Victor is indeed atonement if one means a story in which the death and resurrection of Jesus definitively reveal the basis of power in the universe, so that the invitation from God to participate in God's rule . . . overcomes the forces of sin and reconciles sinners to God.[91]

Weaver understands the devil to be not a literal person but an accumulation of evil within human institutions, organizations, and cultures. These are the "principalities and powers" that Paul speaks of. Chief of these was the accumulation of evils that conspired to kill Jesus. Christ's nonviolent resistance towards such abusive powers is good news for victims of abuse today:

> When Jesus confronts the rule of evil . . . there is no longer the difficulty of a problematic image for victims of abuse. Jesus depicted in narrative Christus Victor is no passive victim. He is an active participant in confronting evil.[92]

Re-Appropriations 3: The Present Time

Emerging Christus Victor

Though anticipated by earlier movements elsewhere in the English-speaking world,[93] from the late 1990s in America there arose a scattered movement that sought to deconstruct modernist ways of being church in favor of a wholesale adoption of postmodernism by the church.[94] A leading

---

89. Ibid., 27.

90. Ibid., 34.

91. Ibid., 45–46.

92. Ibid., 211–12.

93. For instance, the now discredited "Nine O'Clock Service" in the UK.

94. The earliest significant work was Robert Webber's, *Ancient-Future Faith* (1999). He recommends a return to the *Christus Victor* approach on pages 43–61. Attracting far more attention, however, was Brian McLaren's, *A New Kind of Christian* of 2001. A fairly reactionary appraisal of the movement has come from Don Carson: *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*. The most recent assessment of it is Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals* (2011).

light has been Brian McLaren, whose interest mostly lies in deconstructing North American evangelical churchmanship. A typical result of this style of deconstruction on atonement theology has been what has recently been termed the kaleidoscopic view of the atonement[95]—a commitment-free embrace of all ways of looking at the atonement.[96]

Leading the way in theological reflection on behalf of the emerging church movement has been Greg Boyd. He is distinct in his attempt to offer some positive alternatives to traditional evangelicalism. While McLaren is known more for his relentless and provocative criticism of evangelical orthodoxy, Boyd attempts something more constructive. He is insistent that, while diversity in atonement theology should be celebrated, there is an underlying and unified reality to it that repays careful study.[97] He presents a convincing case for the fundamentally cosmic and demonological context in which salvation in both Testaments is understood.[98] In a nuanced way, he is even able to support from Scripture the patristic notions of God deceiving the devil, and successfully retrieves the notion from its notorious crudity.[99] He does this by ingeniously appealing to the fact that, while demons crying out clearly understood who Jesus was, they were seemingly not aware (as in 1 Cor 2:8) of why he came since their evil blinded them to the sacrificial love that had sent the Son into their realm.

Via the emerging church, the *Christus Victor* approach promises to speak to a new generation of churchgoers who are conscious as never before of pernicious global evils to which more individualistic versions of the gospel message seem to have few answers. However, it is significant that the leaders of the emerging church movement are classic "Gen-Xers," characterized by distrust of authority and established social structures. The

---

95. Boyd et al., *The Nature of the Atonement*, chapter 4. Rob Bell's *Love Wins*, 121–57, is a typical example. See also Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, and Burnhope's critique of this approach: "Beyond the Kaleidoscope."

96. Boyd, "Christus Victor View," in Boyd et al., *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, 24.

97. "[T]he biblical narrative could in fact be accurately described as a story of God's ongoing conflict with and ultimate victory over cosmic and human agents who oppose him and who threaten his creation." Boyd, "Christus Victor View," 25. Also, "Everything the New Testament says about the soteriological significance of Christ's work is predicated on the cosmic significance of his work." Boyd, "Christus Victor View," 34.

98. "[H]e truth embodied in the most ancient ways of thinking about the atonement was that God did, in a sense, deceive Satan and the powers, and that Jesus was, in a sense, bait."

99. Boyd, "Christus Victor View," 36–38.

generation succeeding them, often termed the "Millennials" (because they were born within the two decades or so before the year 2000), are much less prone to deconstruction and much more concerned with connectedness.[100] It remains to be seen whether the other major facet to patristic atonement theology—the participation in Christ—will prove popular amongst them.

Summary and Evaluation

All of the views considered in this chapter can be summed up by saying that the cross is here seen as a victory over evil, often either personified as the devil or as other equally personal powers that are in perpetual antipathy towards God and his rule.

This evil is dealt with either by:

1. Undoing its basis. The patristic theories understand man as having come under the authority of the devil or under the thralldom of corruptibility. A ransom is paid to buy off the devil's claims. The emerging church retrieval makes use of this original patristic understanding that evil somehow implodes and defeats itself at the cross. Evil, through its ignorance of the Son's mission, oversteps the mark and is forced to relinquish its claims.

2. Nonviolently resisting it. This is the feminist take on the patristic theory that takes note of the way in which the devil is overcome in the ransom theory. He is not overcome by force, even though it lies within God's power to do so. God instead stoops to overcome the devil's hold on humankind in a nonviolent way that honors claims made by the devil however legitimate or otherwise these are. This amplifies the element identified above of evil defeating itself.

3. Taking power from it. This is the Word of Faith understanding, which shares the fundamental patristic starting point, namely, that humans surrendered their authority to the devil at the fall. From that time the devil has held a legal right over humanity and over what was intended as humanity's domain: creation. With this understanding of the

---

100. The classic text so far on Millennials is Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*. See also a Christian take on the subject: Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials*. For a critique of generational approaches in popular Christian writings see Hilborn and Bird, *God and the Generations*.

problem, the cross and resurrection are construed as a dethroning of the devil and an enthronement of born-again man.

A number of things may be seen as having conspired to bring the victory motif in from the cold within Christian reflection, both at an academic and a practitioner level. Firstly, the existence of systemic evil attaching itself to ideologies and governments to the point of bringing about two world wars has made a cosmic understanding of evil much more imaginable than it could have been before the twentieth century. Secondly, advances in biblical theology have allowed us to see that the Bible itself was all along infused with this kind of a worldview, so that whatever we understand salvation by the cross to be, it must fit in with this framework in order to be exegetically credible, before we even begin to apply such insights to the church or the life of faith. Thirdly, the retreat of Christianity from public life and sociopolitical privilege has inevitably spawned religious radicalism, such as that found within the Word of Faith movement. A gospel that aligns itself with the victory of Christ over evil powers finds a ready audience amongst those whose faith claims are newly marginalized by a pluralist, relativist, and radically secular society.

By way of evaluation, the least credible of the various attempts at retrieving the ransom theory would seem to be the Word of Faith version. It misunderstands the crucial inner logic of the theory. In the context of the systemic evil of Rome, the persecuted church of Irenaeus' era was comforted by the idea of a God who did not stoop to the level of the brutally oppressive, satanic methods of the empire, but subverted and dismantled their power in a nonviolent way.[101] Seizing upon the dramatic flavor of *Christus Victor,* Hagin and Copeland (however they came by this model) instead end up distorting the model into something intensely violent in which Christ "kicks the living daylights out of the devil." For similar reasons, the strongest of the retrievals would be that of Darby Kathleen Ray. She depersonalizes Irenaeus' devil and pictures humankind as needing liberation from the power of systemic evil, to which humans have ceded their authority. This hubristic evil is made to implode by Christ drawing its sting, concentrating all its powers on achieving the death of the Son of God, only to find that death could not hold him. This retains the spirit of Irenaeus'

---

101. This critique of empire is, for Wink, definitive of the shape that pre-Constantinian atonement theology took, in contrast to the later legal, punitive approaches more acceptable to a church that was now part of the empire: Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 150.

original view, dominated as it was by the notes of divine cleverness proving more powerful than brute force, at the same time as bringing us back to what Boyd correctly observed was a biblical as well as an early church worldview of a cosmos locked in combat.[102] But what of application? What are we to do in light of this victory if it is to amount to more than a mythic fiction? Darby's outcomes are highly exemplarist, though surely worth reproducing here: "His [Christ's] use of courage, creativity, and the power of truth to uncover and disrupt the hegemony of power-as-control becomes a prototype for further strategies and action."[103] Thus, at the cross, we are shown what it looks like for "power-as-control" to be replaced by "power-as-compassion."[104] To be true to Irenaeus (and the Bible), something more than this is needed, and Irenaeus supplies it. The other half of Irenaeus' theory was his "recapitulation" model: Christ's participation in every aspect of the human, which was always coupled with what would later be called *theosis:* our partaking of the divine nature: "[Christ became] what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."[105] Our actual participation by faith in the risen life of the victorious Christ empowers us to live in the good of that victory as part of the answer to, no longer part of the problem of, satanically-inspired human evil.

This model of the work of Christ seems worthy of continued attention from those who seek culturally relevant ways of communicating the Christian gospel. There remain untapped riches within the many facets of this model that might be retrieved by ministers and third-sector Christian workers as they serve people caught at a personal, social, or political level, in the terrible power of evil.

---

102.   And the New Testament belief in a personal devil who orchestrates systemic evil need not be abandoned, of course.

103.   Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*, 144.

104.   Ibid.

105.   Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V, Preface.