

# The Spectrum of Christian Faith

*How does Jesus' death mean that  
we can be saved?*

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: *that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures*, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...

-Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4

How would you explain this to someone that does not know anything about Christianity?

# Atonement Theory

Christians throughout history have expanded on the metaphors in the New Testament that say Jesus died for our sins.

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. – Romans 3:25

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. – Colossians 2:15

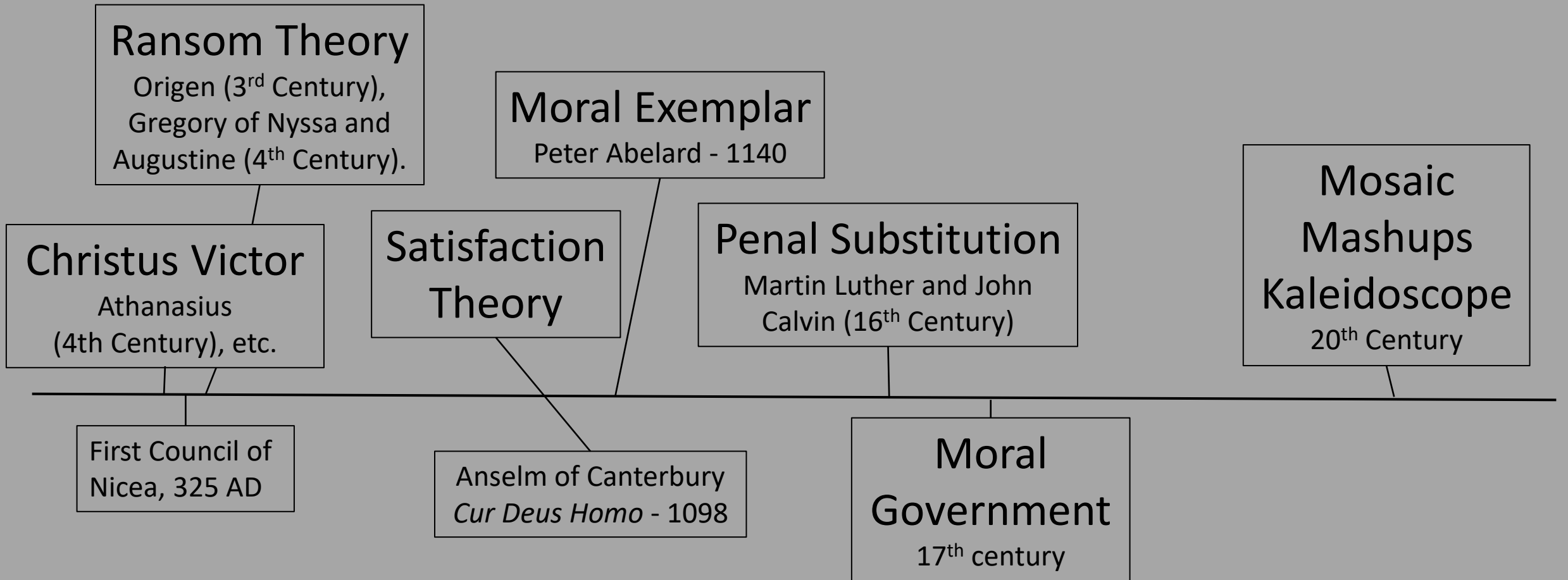
...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. – Matthew 20:28

# Atonement Theory

- Christus Victor
- Ransom
- Satisfaction
- Moral Exemplar
- Penal Substitution
- Moral Government
- Mosaic

# Atonement Theory

## a timeline



# Christus Victor

Since the children have flesh and blood, he (Jesus) too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. — Hebrews 2:14-15

Christus Victor, often coupled with Ransom theory, was the theory of the atonement for the first thousand years of the church. It emphasizes that Jesus' death on the cross defeated the devil, death and the power of sin.

Christus Victor is still the Orthodox Church's view of atonement and this view has grown in popularity across the rest of the church during the 20<sup>th</sup> century after the publication of *Christus Victor* by Gustaf Aulén in 1931.

# Christus Victor

## Pros

- Strong Biblical support
- Church tradition.
- Unifies the theme of Jesus' ministry.
- Unifies Jesus death and resurrection.
- Emphasizes the cosmic dimension of evil.

## Cons

- Not specific on how it helps humanity.
- Overly speculative (Jesus the fish hook.)
- Gives Satan too much credit.

# Ransom

For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

– Hebrews 9:15

This view, also popular in the early church, says that Jesus' death paid a ransom to Satan free humans from bondage for their sin-debt. You might recognize this metaphor from *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. This view is at best a secondary view across the church and is still often coupled with Christus Victor.



# Ransom

## Pros

- Jesus said that he came “to give his life as a ransom for many.”
- Church tradition

## Cons

- Gives Satan too much credit.
- Less explanatory power than other theories.

# Satisfaction

Satisfaction theory was articulated by Anselm of Canterbury in *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God-Human?) where he unpacked the dual nature of Jesus. Anselm concluded that since sinning against God is an infinite crime, humans could not *satisfy* their infinite debt and faced eternal hell. So Jesus the God-man had to come and die to *satisfy* (pay) this debt. This is still the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic church, though the Catholic church leaves room for other views.

# Satisfaction

## Pros

- Church tradition.
- Explains Jesus being fully human and fully God.

## Cons

- Philosophical instead of Biblical argument.
- Rooted in medieval feudalism and less applicable today.

# Moral Exemplar

...he (Jesus) did it to *demonstrate his righteousness* at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. – Romans 3:26

The Moral Exemplar theory of atonement came about a century after the Satisfaction theory and was articulated by Peter Abelard. (Google him). Abelard pictured Jesus as our moral example. His love and sacrifice is what we are to imitate. This view did not displace Satisfaction theory but has been seen as an add-on to other theories by both Catholics and Protestants.

# Moral Exemplar

## Pros

- Emphasizes God's love.
- Echoes the biblical mandate to do things as Christ did.  
e.g. Ephesians 4:32
- Pushed Satan out of the picture.

## Cons

- Subjective model
- Never a dominant model
- Associated with heresies (Socinianism)
- Ignores Satan.

# Penal Substitution

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.”  
– Galatians 3:13

Substitutionary theories of atonement were articulated by the reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This theory states that Jesus dies as a sacrifice in our place, incurring the wrath of God for us. This is the dominant view held today by Protestant churches.

# Penal Substitution

## Pros

- Strong biblical evidence.
- Connection to Old testament ideas of atonement.
- Connects Jesus death with his perfect life.
- Gives fullest explanation of how sinners are reconciled to God.

## Cons

- Forces God to forgive in a specific way.
- Encourages sinful living.
- Individualistic.
- Pits the Father against the Son.
- Too violent.

# Moral Government

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

– Hebrews 9:14

The Moral Government theory was first articulated by reformer Hugo Grotius in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century in response to the PSA view. Grotius said that Jesus died in our place as an example of the consequences of sin to inspire us to “be holy because I am holy.” (Leviticus 11:44 and 45)



# Moral Government

## Pros

- Genuineness of God's forgiveness.
- Calls us to holy living.
- Unity of the trinity.

## Cons

- Jesus does not really bear our sins.
- Downplays God's justice.
- Subjective.

# Mosaic

Since each of these theories are metaphors and no metaphor is complete, a handful of recent theologians have looked to combine them all. Christus Victor and the Ransom theory have been historically coupled and the Moral Exemplar and Government models have also been seen as add-ons to other theories to encourage Christians to holy living. The Satisfaction theory focuses in on the God-man Jesus and Penal substitution focuses in on individual human's plight of sin while Christus Victor/Ransom zoom out on the cosmic force of sin, evil and the devil. Proponents of these models note that multiple metaphors are used in the Bible and flexibility is needed in evangelism.

# Further Reading

- The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views by Gregory A. Boyd, Joel B. Green, Bruce R. Reichenbach and Thomas R. Schreiner, IVP Academic, 2006
- *The Cross of Christ*, centennial edition by John Stott, IVP, 2021
- The Crucifixion by Fleming Rutledge, Eerdmans, 2015
- The Cross in Context by Jackson W, IVP Academic, 2022
- The Mosaic of Atonement by Joshua M. McNall, Zondervan Academic, 2019
- How Jesus Saves by Joshua McNall, Zondervan, 2023
- *Rediscovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition by Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, IVP Academic, 2011
- Approaching the Atonement by Oliver Crisp, IVP Academic, 2020
- Rethinking the Atonement by David M, Moffitt, Baker Academic, 2022

# Meet Keith Wasserman and Good Works

- Good Works: Hospitality and Faithful Discipleship by Keith Wasserman and Christine D. Pohl, Eerdmans, 2021
- <https://good-works.net/>

