Atonement Theories
The word atonement can be broken down into its meaning: at-one-ment, or to make at-one something with has been broken apart. It is interesting that no creedal statements from the early church take a definitive stance on atonement theory. As a result, different theological articulations has surfaced through the centuries to explain the atoning significance of Christ (i.e. the cross is more than the unjust killing of an innocent religious figure. It had eternal, cosmological, global, and personal consequences.)

Recapitulation
Primarily attributed to Irenaeus, and possibly the earliest theological articulation of atonement. Christ came to “recapitulate” the flesh and unite it perfectly with the divine, something Adam failed to do in his original charge to carry the divine image. Thus, Christ becomes the “second Adam,” perfectly obedient and faithful, undergoing suffering and resurrection to restore the connection between human and divine that was present in the “first Adam” before his sin/disobedience destroyed it. Christ is “new humanity” or “new creation.”

Important texts: Ephesians 1 & Romans 5

| Strengths | Significant historical precedent (Irenaeus studied under Polycarp, a student of John!); helpful focus on the importance of incarnation & new creation |
| Weaknesses | The necessity of Christ’s suffering can be a little unclear |

Christus Victor
Strands of Christus Victor appear throughout early church writing, and sometimes this is known as “patristic atonement theory.” Essentially, the cross and resurrection are the ultimate and final defeat of sin, evil, the “powers,” and Satan. This victory is what breaks the power of sin over humanity, and is what allows us to be reunited with God. This theory somewhat faded from awareness through the Middle Ages and Reformation periods, but was popularly reintroduced by Gustaf Aulen in the 1930s.

Important Texts: Colossians 2, Hebrews 2, 1 John 3:8

| Strengths | Strong historical precedent; helpful articulation of what resurrection means and why it is important; strong prevalence in scriptural themes |
| Weaknesses | Can easily become too abstracted and separated from transformation and sanctification in the Christian life |

Ransom (a specific development of Christus Victor)
Gregory of Nyssa is typically credited with the first major expression of ransom theory. This understanding originates with Christ’s own words in Mark: “the Son of Man came . . . to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10.45) Humanity was subject to Satan, as a result of the failure in the Garden, and he since exercised power over us in the form of death. Christ was offered, sacrificially, to the Enemy, and thus suffered the worst death imaginable. However,
Satan “overstepped” his bounds by laying claim to Christ. Christ was sinless, and therefore Satan had no right to exert his power of death over him. Therefore, his power was broken, and death itself began to unravel (C.S. Lewis works from this foundation in Narnia).

**Strengths**
Based in Christ’s own words about his purpose; logically presented; powerful image of Christ’s dramatic victory; the purpose of his suffering is clear

**Weaknesses**
Could depict God as deceptive, as he “pulls a cosmic trick” on the Enemy

**Satisfaction**
Put forward by Anselm around the year 1100, he argued that God’s honor was stained by the sin that His creation turned to. For true atonement to occur with wayward humans, God’s honor must be restored. This could only be accomplished by a human, since humans were the ones who sinned in the first place. However, only a divine being could adequately do what was needed in this case, which shows the necessity of the incarnation, the God-man. Christ obeyed perfectly, thereby restoring honor to the Father, which is credited to the rest of humanity. *There is an important distinction between this and penal-substitution!*

*Penal-Substitution states that Christ paid a penalty we can’t pay, while Satisfaction states that Christ obeyed in a way that we can’t obey. Honor is the currency for Anselm, while guilt is the currency for penal-substitution. Both are substitutionary.*

**Strengths**
Strong logic; God acts to reconcile humans; presented in cultural language that was easy to understand in its time

**Weaknesses**
Rooted in a cultural paradigm of Lords/Servants, Honor/Shame, which is difficult in a modern context. While the logic is tightly argued, the scriptural basis can be a little unclear

**Healing/Moral Influence/Subjective**
Put forward by Peter Abelard around the same time, and in response to, Anselm’s satisfaction, this theory claims that observing Christ on the cross, and this particular display of God’s ultimate love and sacrifice, softens the hearts of humans and moves them to repentance. In this, God is the “subject” (performing the reconciliatory act) and humans are the “object” (receiving the act). Humans are the ones changed, and thus reconciled back to God.

*Important Texts: 2 Corinthians 5:19 & Luke 7*

**Strengths**
Emphasizes personal change/transformation as a result of the cross; helpfully recaptures the idea that God is working to reconcile the world

**Weaknesses**
The “bigger picture” is completely lost; it is unclear how the problem of sin & evil is actually solved by God; how does the resurrection fit into this?
Luther - The “Dramatic” View
A quick word about Luther, as his language about God’s wrath sometimes places him in the satisfaction/penal-substitution camp. However, his articulation of atonement may be more accurately associated with the Christus Victor/Ransom metaphors. Luther believed that Jesus conquered the “tyrants,” which include Sin, the Enemy, Death, the Law, and God’s Wrath. For Luther, the Divine Love is in conflict with these tyrants, and Christ is ultimately victorious. Luther does freely use the word “satisfaction,” but for him it is the Divine Love that is satisfied in Christ, as opposed to the divine wrath.

**Important Text: Galatians!**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Powerful reimagining of Christus Victor; Divine Love is the foundation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weaknesses</td>
<td>Potentially confusing split between God’s Law/Wrath and His will in Christ</td>
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Penal Substitution (*the Reformers’ version of satisfaction*)
Rooted in Anselm’s satisfaction theory, but with a few significant shifts, penal substitution became prominent after the reformation in the 16th century. God’s perfect justice demands reparations for the infraction of sin, and Christ bears the wrath God would otherwise direct to sinful humans. A transaction still takes place, but rather than restoring honor to God, Christ pays the punishment/debt that is due to humans as a result of sin. The clearest articulation of this belongs to Charles Hodge in the 19th century.

**Important Texts: Romans 3, Galatians 3, Hebrews 9**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Personal guilt &amp; sin is addressed; powerful imagery of Christ’s substitution for our punishment; easily understood in a Western/Legal context</th>
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<td>Weaknesses</td>
<td>Rooted in Western notions of justice and individual guilt; caricatures can “split” the Trinitarian will (“Jesus saves us from God”); God’s wrath seems to be His foundational characteristic</td>
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Non-Violent Atonement Theories
This is too broad a category to adequately capture in a few sentences, but enough theologians (particularly in feminist, liberation, and progressive circles) have articulated “non-violent” atonement theories that they at least deserve a mention. These theologians are largely concerned with “glorifying” suffering, especially the practical implications in abusive relationships or oppressed people groups, and potentially distorting one’s image of God as a “bloodthirsty” deity who is bound by abstract notions of justice. Rather, the violence of the cross is purely inflicted by humans. Just as humans wrongly declared Jesus guilty, God “wrongly” declares humans innocent, refusing to enact vengeance. The resurrection is God’s profound “yes!” to his obedient, suffering son, and His profound “no!” to the humans/Enemy that killed him.
| **Strengths** | Recaptures the image of God's own suffering on the cross at human hands; helpful critique of “glorified suffering” and focus on minority populations |
| **Weaknesses** | Weak historical precedent; God’s wrath towards sin isn’t addressed |