

## ***Atonement and the Death of Christ: An Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Exploration***

**By William Lane Craig**

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**I**n *Atonement and the Death of Christ*, William Lane Craig sets out to defend a theory of the atonement that is biblically grounded, historically informed, and philosophically coherent. The book has three parts, one for each of the three areas mentioned.

In part I, Craig argues that although the Bible contains a plethora of atonement motifs, the central one is sacrifice. He therefore labors to understand the meaning of animal sacrifices in the Old Testament, the Servant of the Lord of Isaiah 53, and how these are in turn understood by the New Testament authors. He concludes that “on the pattern of the Passover and Levitical sacrifices described in the OT, Christ’s death serves the twin purposes of expiating our sin and propitiating God” (87), and that the NT authors identified Christ with Isaiah’s Servant, who endures the punishment (i.e., death) that is our just dessert for sin.

In part II, Craig briefly surveys Patristic, Medieval, and Reformation and Post-Reformation theories of the atonement. The survey is somewhat superficial (as Craig himself acknowledges [142]), but it does helpfully correct many misrepresentations in the secondary literature. His chief findings are that it’s incorrect to think the fathers were singularly committed to a *Christus Victor* theory of the atonement; Anselm and Aquinas were correct

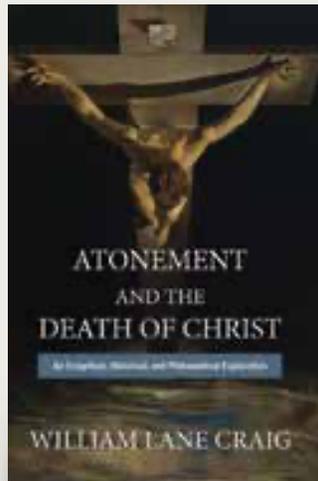
to emphasize that the demands of God’s justice require either punishment or compensation (*satisfactio*), and the Reformers were correct in arguing for the former *à la* penal substitution. Socinus emerges as the staunchest critic of penal substitution, and his critique “remains today unsurpassed in terms of its depth and breadth” (128).

Craig announces at the beginning of part III that penal substitution cannot be a “merely tangential, minor facet of an adequate atonement theory,” citing “Isaiah 53 and its NT employment in the NT” (147) as the reason. It is, rather, “foundational” to the other aspects of the atonement, and so a biblically adequate theory must have penal substitution “at its center” (147). He thus launches a subtle and impressive defense of penal substitution—understood as “the doctrine that God inflicted upon

Christ the suffering that we deserved as the punishment for our sins, as a result of which we no longer deserve punishment” (147)—against four main arguments. First, it is philosophically incoherent because punishment requires the punished be guilty, whereas Christ isn’t. Second, it is theologically incoherent because it stipulates preconditions of God’s love and forgiveness, whereas God’s perfect love entails there can’t be. Third, it is unjust because an innocent person (Christ) is punished. And fourth, it does not satisfy

the demands of justice since the actual persons guilty of wrongdoing go unpunished.

Defenders of these arguments tend to view the atonement in terms of reconciliation in private relationships, rather than in terms of a legal rift between two parties. The latter, however, opens up a whole world of resources in well-established legal thought that can help us make sense of the atonement. This is, in fact, a more fitting way to



view the relationship between us and a perfectly just judge and ruler of the world, whose moral law we have broken. God’s essential retributive justice requires every sin receive a proportional punishment. God—being at once the legislator, judge, and ruler of the world—can determine that the demands of justice are satisfied by Christ, God incarnate, being punished on our behalf. This is not unjust, given a doctrine of imputation where our sins are forensically imputed to Christ, who acts as both our substitute and representative before God. So, while Christ remains personally virtuous and sinless, he was yet declared legally guilty before God and so legally liable to punishment. Something analogous occurs in real-world cases of vicarious liability. God thus displays his love and mercy toward us in that he foregoes punishing us “in our proper persons” (208), and extends to us an offer of forgiveness, which is akin to “a legal pardon by an executive authority” (172).

The strongest part of *Atonement and the Death of Christ* is doubtlessly the third, where, by appropriating legal concepts and actual judicial precedent, penal substitution is deftly explicated and arguments against it effectively countered. The reader does have to occasionally remind himself, however, that Craig is not modeling theology on the pattern of our justice system, which he says would be a “silly project” (201). Rather, Craig appeals to examples in our

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own justice system as defeaters to “the all-too-often repeated assertion that there is nothing in our experience analogous to” the moral nerve of penal substitution—that is, “the imputation of wrongdoing or guilt to an innocent person” (270).

The philosophical defensibility of penal substitution notwithstanding, I do not think Craig has demonstrated penal substitution to be the *central* biblical atonement motif. It is hard to avoid the impression that Craig came to this study already believing in the centrality of penal substitution, and so unduly focused his biblical exegesis on those passages and themes that support it. Craig repeatedly acknowledges that the Bible includes a rich variety of atonement motifs, but I take it that an adequate *theory* of the atonement will be one that integrates all of those motifs into a coherent whole; each motif will find its place within a logical structure that explains how atonement works. The problem is that Craig pays virtually no attention at all to Scripture’s spiritual warfare motif as it relates to the atonement (especially in the New Testament), which is robust enough to have inspired the first theories of the atonement among the fathers. It is telling that penal substitution, at least as it is put forward by Craig as a theory of the atonement, is wholly consistent with the nonexistence of Satan and demons. Is that really a biblically adequate theory of the atonement? It seems to me that integrating penal substitution into a robust *Christus Victor* theory would be a promising endeavor.

Regardless of whether Craig has himself succeeded in offering a biblically grounded, historically informed, and philosophically coherent theory of the atonement, he is surely correct that all other extant treatments lack such ambition. His book, therefore, is a landmark contribution to the literature on the atonement and an exemplary exercise in philosophical theology. ■

**CHAD MCINTOSH** (BA, Calvin College; MA, PhD, Cornell University) currently lives in central Ohio where he enjoys homesteading and writing when he can.