

“HIS FLESH FOR OUR FLESH”: THE DOCTRINE OF ATONEMENT IN THE SECOND CENTURY

by
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In March and April of 1930, Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulén (1879–1977) delivered a series of eight lectures on the doctrine of the atonement at the University of Uppsala.² In these lectures he distinguished between three main views of the atonement: the Christus Victor model which he regarded as the “classic” idea, the Latin interpretation, and the moral influence view. Aulén said relatively little about the moral influence view choosing rather to focus his attention on the first two ideas. By the “Latin” view Aulén meant an understanding of the atonement that interprets the death of Christ as providing satisfaction for sin or effecting a change in God’s disposition toward sinners. Aulén’s explanation of the Latin view encompassed both Anselm’s satisfaction view and the doctrine of penal substitution. Aulén described the central theme of the classic view as “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 mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in

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²These lectures were published in 1930. In the following year, the lectures were translated into English and published as Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1931). For discussion of the impact which this book has had on atonement studies, see William P. Loewe, “Irenaeus’ Soteriology: *Christus Victor* Revisited,” *Anglican Theological Review* 67 (January 1985): 1–2. And for methodological critiques of Aulén’s book, see idem, “Encountering the Crucified God: The Soteriology of Sebastian Moore,” *Horizons* 9 (Fall 1982): 216–19 and George O. Evenson, “A Critique of Aulén’s *Christus Victor*,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 28 (October 1957): 738–49. Gustaf Emanuel Hildebrand Aulén served as professor of systematic theology at the University of Lund (Sweden) from 1913 until 1933 when he became bishop of Strängnäs. As an ecumenical leader within the Church of Sweden (Lutheran) he was involved in the first meeting of the World Council of Churches in 1948. In 1952 Aulén resigned his bishopric and returned to the University of Lund where he remained professor emeritus until his death in 1977. Throughout his lengthy career Aulén wrote a number of books and hymns. However he is best known today for his study of the historical development of the doctrine of the atonement. The most comprehensive study of Aulén’s life and thought is Joseph J. Anderlonis, “The Soteriology of Gustaf Aulén: The Origins, Development and Relevancy of the Christus Victor Atonement View” (Ph.D. dissertation, Pontificiae Universitatis Gregorianae, 1988).

Him God reconciles the world to Himself.”³ Aulén argued that this view was the prevailing understanding of the atonement among the church fathers.⁴ He asserted that Christus Victor has “held a place in the history of Christian doctrine whose importance it would not be easy to exaggerate,” for he explained, “it is the dominant idea of the Atonement throughout the early church period.”⁵ Aulén did not see the Christus Victor interpretation as limited to a certain region. Rather he claimed that it was “the dominant view of the Western as of the Eastern Fathers.”⁶ This dominance, Aulén believed, extended beyond the first few centuries. In fact, he claimed that Christus Victor was “the ruling idea of the Atonement for the first thousand years of Christian history.”⁷

Although Aulén argued that Christus Victor was the view held by nearly all the church fathers, he admitted that the Latin view did not originate *ex novo* with Anselm in the eleventh century. He stated that during the final years of the second century, Tertullian began “to quarry the stones for the future edifice of the Latin theory.”⁸ However, he pointed out that Tertullian developed his ideas about sin, merit, and satisfaction in the context of penance performed by humans, not in the context of the doctrine of Christ’s atonement. For this reason Aulén noted that

Cyprian [c. 200–258] first applies the ideas of Tertullian directly to the Atonement. After Cyprian the Latin idea is to be found here and there in the Western Church, and increasingly as time goes on. Nevertheless, during the patristic period the Latin doctrine was never fully worked out, much less set consciously in opposition to the classic idea.⁹

Therefore, he stated, “It is possible to fix with precision the time of the first appearance of the Latin theory.”¹⁰ While Tertullian prepared some of the building materials for the Latin view and Cyprian applied Tertullian’s ideas to the atonement, the Latin understanding of the atonement was not fully constructed until the time of Anselm.¹¹ Aulén therefore held that although Tertullian and Cyprian laid some of the groundwork for the Latin theory, this understanding of the atonement was not a distinct view until Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*.¹²

³Aulén, *Christus Victor*, p. 20.

⁴Ibid., p. 22.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., p. 55.

⁷Ibid., pp. 22–23.

⁸Ibid., p. 54.

⁹Ibid., pp. 54–55.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 97.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 97–100.

¹²Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* (“Why God Became Man”) was written between 1094

In recent years a number of scholars have adopted Aulén's thesis concerning the prevalence of Christus Victor in the early church and the late development of a Latin or satisfaction view of the atonement.¹³ Gregory Boyd, for example, essentially paraphrases Aulén when he states that the Christus Victor model "dominated the thinking of the church for the first thousand years of its history."¹⁴ Timothy Gorringer writes in absolute terms when he asserts that a satisfaction view of the atonement "did not form a part of the understanding of the early Church Fathers."¹⁵ And Peter Carnley speaks unequivocally when declares that the idea of penal substitution "was not known before Anselm's time" and that "for its first thousand years, Christian reflection on the redemptive meaning of the Cross had got on perfectly well without it."¹⁶

In response to these claims, this paper will argue that many of the second-century church fathers viewed the atonement of Christ as involving substitution for sinners and satisfaction for sins.¹⁷ Other writers have capably argued for the doctrine of penal substitution on the

and 1098.

¹³Scholars holding a wide range of opinions about the atonement have argued that the penal substitutionary form of this view arose quite late. According to the foreword of a recent book of essays on the atonement, the contributors are troubled by the popularity of the doctrine of penal substitution and "attributing [penal substitution's] genesis to Anselm" these writers propose a number of alternative models of the atonement (Willard Swartley, "Foreword," in *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], p. 10).

¹⁴Gregory A. Boyd, "Christus Victor View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. 24. Also see *ibid.*, p. 46. Similar statements appear in Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), p. 123; John Macquarrie, "Demonology and the Classic Idea of Atonement," *Expository Times* 68 (October 1956): 3–6; *idem*, "Demonology and the Classic Idea of Atonement," *Expository Times* 68 (November 1956): 60–63; Nathan Rieger, "Good News for Postmodern Man: Christus Victor in the Lucan Kerygma," in *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 381; Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), p. 43.

¹⁵Timothy Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence and the Rhetoric of Salvation*, Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion, vol. 9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 81.

¹⁶Peter Carnley, *Reflections in Glass: Trends and Tensions in the Contemporary Anglican Church* (Sydney, Australia: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 132.

¹⁷As Schreiner has correctly pointed out, the Christus Victor model tends to downplay human sin and the need for forgiveness. Instead of sin and guilt, the Christus Victor view focuses on victory over Satan and the powers of evil as the primary achievement of the cross (Thomas R. Schreiner, "Penal Substitution Response [to Christus Victor]," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006], pp. 50–53).

basis of the Old and New Testaments.¹⁸ But to date little has been written seeking to demonstrate that the second-century church fathers held to an understanding of the atonement that viewed Christ as a substitute for sinners who bore their sins and the punishment which their sins deserve.¹⁹ Beginning with Clement of Rome (fl. 90–99) and continuing up through Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 200), this essay will focus on the writings of those fathers who lived before Tertullian and embraced the basic components of what Aulén called the Latin view of the atonement.

This paper will not claim that a highly developed doctrine of the atonement can be found in the early church fathers. During this period theological attention was largely focused on other important issues. As Jaroslav Pelikan has observed,

While the relation of Jesus Christ to God and the relation of the human and the divine within his person became the subject for doctrinal controversy and dogmatic definition, the saving work of Christ remained dogmatically undefined. Yet it was certainly a major constituent of Christian doctrine—if by doctrine we mean what the church believes, teaches, and confesses.²⁰

¹⁸For discussions of the biblical basis of penal substitution, see especially Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III, eds., *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological & Practical Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004); Steve Jeffrey, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity Press, 2007); Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965); Thomas R. Schreiner, “Penal Substitution View,” in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

Proponents of penal substitution do not deny that the Scriptures contain a Christus Victor theme. However, they argue that Christ’s victory over Satan is not the primary means by which God saves sinners, and they point out that the Christus Victor model fails to explain exactly how Christ’s victory is won. See, e.g., Evenson, “Critique of Aulén’s *Christus Victor*,” pp. 747–49; Jeffrey, Ovey, and Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, p. 139; Schreiner, “Penal Substitution Response [to Christus Victor],” pp. 50–53; Garry J. Williams, “Penal Substitution: A Response to Recent Criticisms,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 (March 2007): 85–86. Evenson summarizes the main weakness of the Christus Victor view: “Any explanation of the atonement that fails to emphasize the fact that Christ by His death made atonement for our sins is not a full doctrine of the atonement.... Sin is more than an evil power to be defeated, for sin makes sinners guilty before God. Until that guilt is atoned for, the triumph over evil powers is of no real value” (“Critique of Aulén’s *Christus Victor*,” p. 747).

¹⁹A helpful survey of the historical background of the doctrine of penal substitution appears in Jeffrey, Ovey, and Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, pp. 161–204. In this book the authors seek to provide a “fairly exhaustive” list of writers who affirmed some form of penal substitution up through Gregory the Great (c. 540–604). However, the only source discussed from the second century is Justin Martyr (*ibid.*, pp. 163–66). See also Garry John Williams, “A Critical Exposition of Hugo Grotius’s Doctrine of the Atonement in *De satisfactione Christi*” (D.Phil. dissertation, University of Oxford, 1999), pp. 56–94.

²⁰Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)*, vol. 1 in *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 141–42.

Although none of the early church fathers produced a carefully delineated treatise on the nature of Christ's atoning work, this does not mean that they did not understand the significance of the death of Christ. Like the NT writers before them, the church fathers employed a variety of images to describe the atonement. Contrary to the assertions made by some scholars, however, among these images can be found an understanding of the atonement which clearly includes the idea of Christ dying as a substitute for sinners, bearing their sins and the penalty which their sins deserve.

CLEMENT OF ROME

Traditionally dated A.D. 95–97, the epistle known as *1 Clement* is commonly regarded as the earliest extant Christian writing outside the NT.²¹ Although the letter states that it is from “the church of God that sojourns in Rome,” ancient testimony attributes the work to Clement of Rome who likely wrote the epistle on behalf of the church.²²

Clement was one of the earliest leaders in the church at Rome.²³

²¹Donald Alfred Hagner, *The Use of the Old and New Testaments in Clement of Rome*, *Novum Testamentum Supplements*, vol. 34 (Leiden: Brill, 1973), p. 1; Michael W. Holmes, trans. and ed., *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), p. 36. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from *1 Clement* are taken from Holmes. As Holmes points out, a slightly earlier date is possible (*Apostolic Fathers*, p. 38). However, Herron's suggestion of a date c. A.D. 70 is untenable due to a number of internal factors (Thomas J. Herron, “The Most Probable Date of the First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians,” in *Papers Presented to the Tenth International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford 1987*, *Studia Patristica*, vol. 21 [Leuven: Peeters, 1989], pp. 106–21). Although this paper concentrates on sources from the second century, Clement's letter is included because it was written on the eve of the second century and was read in the church in Corinth throughout the second century (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.23.11 [hereafter, *Hist. eccl.*]).

²²According to Eusebius, both Hegesippus (c. 160) and Dionysius of Corinth (c. 170) claimed that this letter to Corinth was written by Clement (*Hist. eccl.* 4.22.1; 4.23.11). And an earlier source which originated in Rome indicates that a man named Clement was commissioned by the church to send letters to other churches (*Shepherd of Hermas, Vision* 2.4.3). Although not certain, the Clement mentioned by Hermas may have been the person known as Clement of Rome. Hermas's second vision is usually dated c. 90–100 (Clayton N. Jefford with Kenneth J. Harder and Louis D. Amezaga Jr., *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: An Introduction* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996], p. 134; Harry O. Maier, *The Social Setting of the Ministry as Reflected in the Writings of Hermas, Clement and Ignatius*, *Studies in Christianity and Judaism*, no. 11 [Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1991], p. 55). Peter Lampe dates Hermas near the middle of the second century, and therefore concludes that “we are either dealing with two different men named Clement or with the same person who at the time of Hermas was an old man” (*From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. Michael Steinhauser, ed. Marshall D. Johnson [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003], p. 206, n. 1).

²³Tertullian claims that Clement was ordained by Peter as the second bishop of Rome (*Prescription against Heretics* 32). But Irenaeus and Eusebius list Clement as the third (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.3 [hereafter, *Haer.*; *Hist. eccl.* 3.4.9]). Today the author of *1 Clement* is generally recognized as having been the third bishop of Rome who lived near the end of the first century (Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001],

According to tradition he was acquainted with the apostles Peter and Paul.²⁴ Both Origen and Eusebius identify Clement of Rome with the Clement referred to as one of Paul's fellow workers in Philippians 4:3.²⁵ But Lightfoot has demonstrated that Origen and Eusebius were probably mistaken on this point.²⁶ Nevertheless Clement's ministry clearly overlapped that of the apostle John. As a first-century church leader who probably knew several of the apostles, Clement provides an excellent example of how early Christians viewed the work of Christ.

The epistle of Clement was written to address "the detestable and unholy schism, so alien and foreign to those chosen by God, which a few reckless and arrogant persons have kindled to such a pitch of insanity that your good name, once so renowned and loved by all, has been greatly reviled."²⁷ Apparently in Clement's day there were divisions in the church at Corinth much like those that Paul had encountered in this church a few decades earlier. Either the church at Rome had heard reports about the problems at Corinth, or as is more likely, some members of the church in Corinth had asked the Roman church to help settle the conflict.²⁸ Due to "sudden and repeated misfortunes and reverses" the church at Rome was somewhat slow to address the situation in Corinth, but this letter was their eventual response.²⁹

pp. 63–64; Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann, 2nd ed. [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007], p. 47). Recently, Lampe has argued that in Clement's day Rome contained many house communities each with their own bishop and that the rise of a monarchical episcopacy in Rome can be dated to the second half of the second century. He therefore views Clement as one of the many bishops in Rome at the end of the first century (*From Paul to Valentinus*, pp. 397–408).

²⁴Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, 4 vols. (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1983–86), 1:42.

²⁵Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 6.36; *Hist. eccl.* 3.4.9.

²⁶Among his reasons for rejecting this view, J. B. Lightfoot points out that the Clement to whom Paul refers was a resident of Philippi not of Rome. Lightfoot also explains that the chronology required by Origen's view poses a nearly insurmountable difficulty, and he notes that early tradition represents Clement of Rome as a disciple of Peter rather than of Paul. All these difficulties, Lightfoot states, might possibly be set aside if Clement were a rare name, but instead it is fairly common (*Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* [reprint of 1913 ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953], pp. 168–69). See also Hagner, *Use of the Old and New Testaments in Clement*, p. 3.

²⁷*1 Clement* 1.1 [hereafter, *1 Clem.*].

²⁸Apparently a group of younger members in the church at Corinth had deposed a few of the older leaders of the congregation (*1 Clem.* 3.3; 44.6). The reason for this action is not altogether clear, but in light of Clement's admonition, it likely stemmed from jealousy and pride on the part of the younger group and not from lack of faithfulness among the older. See Davorin Peterlin, "Clement's Answer to the Corinthian Conflict in AD 96," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39 (March 1996): 57–69.

²⁹*1 Clem.* 1.1. Chadwick sees these "misfortunes and reverses" as referring to persecution by the Roman authorities (*Church in Ancient Society*, pp. 59–60). But other scholars reject this interpretation suggesting instead that these "misfortunes" may signify that much like Corinth the church in Rome was experiencing its own divisions

The letter itself is written in a pastoral tone as an extended homily. It was not intended to be an update on the Roman church or merely a friendly letter. It certainly was not written as a treatise on the atonement. Instead the letter was meant to be both a pointed exhortation to the Corinthian church to pursue unity and a rebuke to those who had stirred up the rebellion.³⁰ Nevertheless this letter does contain several interesting statements about the work of Christ.

When the earliest post-apostolic believers speak about the atonement they are often content to merely quote or paraphrase biblical statements about Christ's death. Clement is no exception to this general pattern. In *1 Clement* 16.3–14, he cites Isaiah 53:1–12 nearly word-for-word from the LXX and interprets the OT text as referring to Christ. Clement urges the Corinthian believers to imitate the humility which Christ displayed as he bore our sins and suffered for our sakes.³¹ Regrettably Clement does not offer any significant interpretation of Isaiah 53 beyond seeing it as a prophecy about the death of Christ.

A little later in the letter Clement exhorts his readers to godly behavior out of reverence for Christ when he writes, "Let us fear the Lord Jesus Christ, whose blood was given for us."³² Here, as if in passing, Clement mentions that Christ's blood was offered up for his people. He does not merely say that Christ's blood was shed at the hands of sinners. Rather Clement appears to see Christ willingly giving his blood for sinners. Again, this passage is somewhat vague; however it seems clear that Clement would have rejected the idea that Christ's death was merely the result of him being perceived as a threat to the Jewish religious establishment or to social stability in general.³³ Instead he views Christ willingly offering up his blood on behalf of sinners.

A final passage in *1 Clement* provides a little more insight into how Clement viewed Christ's death. In *1 Clement* 49, the author encourages the Corinthian believers to demonstrate genuine love for one another. Such love, he notes, will cause believers to accept one another as Christ accepted them. Clement writes, "In love the Master received us. Because of the love that he had for us, Jesus Christ our Lord, in accordance with God's will, gave his blood for us, and his flesh for our flesh,

(Bart D. Ehrman, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Bart D. Ehrman, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003], 1:24; L. L. Welborn, "On the Date of First Clement," *Biblical Research* 29 [1984]: 38–48).

³⁰Exactly how the church in Corinth responded to this exhortation is unknown, but there is some reason to believe that they reacted favorably. According to Eusebius, Dionysius (bishop in Corinth c. 170–c. 180) stated that in his day the letter was still being read publicly in the church (*Hist. eccl.* 4.23.11).

³¹*1 Clem.* 16.4.

³²*1 Clem.* 21.6.

³³Contra, e.g., Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 267–74. Borg would likely accept this interpretation of Clement, but he would argue that the early church misunderstood why Christ was crucified.

and his life for our lives.”³⁴

Like the previous two, this passage is not part of an extended argument about the meaning of Christ’s death. It is a description of Christ’s atonement that appears in the context of moral exhortation. However this statement should not for this reason be viewed as failing to reflect Clement’s understanding of the cross. In this passage, he depicts Christ’s death as a substitution for sinners. He states that Christ died not only *for* sinners, but also *instead of* sinners. In other words, Christ died in the place of sinful humans. Clement views Christ’s life as offered up “in accordance with God’s will” and as given in place of the lives which sinners had forfeited.³⁵ Although Clement does not explain his understanding of the atonement in detail, he provides a very early example of a church leader who viewed Christ’s death as a substitution for sinners.

EPISTLE OF BARNABAS

The *Epistle of Barnabas* is of unknown authorship, but it probably has no historical connection to the Barnabas mentioned in the book of Acts.³⁶ Internal evidence suggests that it was written between the destruction of the Jewish temple in A.D. 70 and the time when the Roman Emperor Hadrian (c. 76–138) built a pagan temple on the same site c. 135.³⁷

³⁴ *I Clem.* 49.6.

³⁵ Although he uses the terms “our flesh” and “our lives” Clement is apparently speaking about something beyond mortal life. Christ’s physical death does not keep his followers from experiencing physical death. Clement is most likely describing Christ’s death as a substitution for the eternal death which sinners deserve.

³⁶ L. W. Barnard, “The ‘Epistle of Barnabas’ and Its Contemporary Setting,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Teil 2: Principat, Band 27.1, ed. Wolfgang Haase and Hildegard Temporini (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), p. 172; Clayton, Harder and Amezaga, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 14–16; Reidar Hvalvik, *The Struggle for Scripture and Covenant: The Purpose of the Epistle of Barnabas and Jewish-Christian Competition in the Second Century*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.82 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), pp. 43–44; James Carleton Paget, *The Epistle of Barnabas: Outlook and Background*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.64 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), pp. 3–9. Clement of Alexandria attributes the work to Paul’s companion, the apostle Barnabas (*Miscellanies* 2.6; 2.20; 5.10). But at least as early as the fourth century, the letter’s apostolic origin was being questioned. Eusebius lists it among the “disputed writings” (*Hist. eccl.* 6.13.6) and refers to it as one of the “spurious books” (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25.4).

³⁷ In *Barnabas* 16.3–4 [hereafter, *Barn.*], the writer mentions the destruction of the Jewish temple and predicts that it will someday be rebuilt. The latter comment suggests that a Roman temple had not yet been constructed on the site. For further discussion about the date of the letter, see Barnard, “Epistle of Barnabas,” pp. 172–80; Paget, *Epistle of Barnabas*, pp. 9–30. The epistle has traditionally been viewed as having an Egyptian provenance due to the author’s proclivity for allegorical interpretation akin to that practiced in Alexandria (Barnard, “Epistle of Barnabas,” pp. 172–73, 190–91; Quasten, *Patrology*, 1:89). However, some scholars have recently suggested an origin in either Asia Minor or western Syria (Claudio Moreschini and Enrico Norelli, *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature: A Literary History*, trans. Michael J. O’Connell,

The book has traditionally been regarded as a letter, but since neither the author nor the recipients are named in the document, it may be a letter in literary appearance only. In terms of content, it is more of a general doctrinal treatise. The document is primarily focused on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. As Bart D. Ehrman notes, the book's basic thrust is that "Judaism is, and always has been, a false religion."³⁸ Hvalvik summarizes the author's purpose in similar language when he writes that the author "tries to show the total error of Judaism so that his readers will stay firm in their Christian faith."³⁹

Throughout the letter the writer seeks to demonstrate that the Jews have misunderstood the OT Scriptures.⁴⁰ In a section discussing the meaning of the OT sacrificial system the author compares the death of Christ to the rite of atonement and declares, "If, therefore, the Son of God, who is Lord and is destined to judge the living and the dead, suffered in order that his wounds might give us life, let us believe that the Son of God could not suffer except for our sake."⁴¹ Here the writer describes Christ suffering on the cross in order to give us life, but he does not specify why humans are subject to death. A few lines later he explains, "the Lord commanded it because he himself was planning to offer the vessel of his spirit as a sacrifice for our sins."⁴² The writer understands Christ's suffering and death as a divinely planned sacrifice for human sins. He implies that sin is the reason humans experience death, and he views Christ's death as the means by which these sins and their penalty are removed. He does not appear to view sin as a mere power or force to which humans are held captive. Rather he speaks about actual sins.⁴³ Christ's sacrifice was made to deal with the sins committed by sinners and not merely with the principle of sin.

2 vols. [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005], 1:124–25). Hvalvik surveys the various theories and concludes that a provenance more specific than "Eastern Mediterranean" cannot be proven (*Struggle for Scripture and Covenant*, pp. 35–42).

³⁸*Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 219.

³⁹*Struggle for Scripture and Covenant*, p. 164.

⁴⁰Barnabas claims that the Jews misunderstood the Law because an evil angel persuaded them to interpret it literally (*Barn.* 9.4–5). One of the author's better known allegories is his theory that, based on alphanumerics, Abraham's act of circumcising 318 servants revealed that Jesus would be crucified (*Barn.* 9.7–9).

⁴¹*Barn.* 7.2. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from the *Epistle of Barnabas* are taken from Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*.

⁴²*Barn.* 7.3.

⁴³Compare this with Boyd's statement that Paul views sin as "a quasi-autonomous power that holds people groups as well as individuals in bondage.... Paul believed what was needed was nothing less than God breaking into human history to destroy the power of sin and rescuing us from the cosmic powers that keep us in bondage to sin" ("Christus Victor," p. 29).

POLYCARP

Sometimes remembered more for the account of his martyrdom than for his own writings, Polycarp of Smyrna was held in high esteem by many in the early church.⁴⁴ The only extant writing of Polycarp is his *Letter to the Philippians*, but according to Eusebius, Irenaeus knew of other letters which Polycarp wrote to neighboring churches and to individual Christians.⁴⁵ Polycarp's letter to the Philippian church has generally been dated close to the death of Ignatius (c. 110–117).⁴⁶

At the request of the Philippians, Polycarp addresses the issue of righteousness throughout most of the book.⁴⁷ After giving specific

⁴⁴Outside of the book of Acts, the record of Polycarp's martyrdom (*Martyrdom of Polycarp*) is the earliest extant account of the martyrdom of an individual Christian (Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 142; Quasten, *Patrology*, 1:77). Despite the detailed record of Polycarp's death, the actual date of his martyrdom has been widely debated. See, e.g., Paul Hartog, *Polycarp and the New Testament: The Occasion, Rhetoric, Theme, and Unity of the Epistle to the Philippians and Its Allusions to New Testament Literature*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.134 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), pp. 22–32; Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 144–45; William R. Schoedel, "Polycarp of Smyrna and Ignatius of Antioch," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Teil 2: Principat, Band 27.1, ed. Wolfgang Haase and Hildegard Temporini (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), pp. 354–55; W. Telfer, "The Date of the Martyrdom of Polycarp," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 3 (1952): 79–83. Leonard L. Thompson puts the date of Polycarp's martyrdom at "February 23, 155—or thereabouts" ("The Martyrdom of Polycarp: Death in the Roman Games," *Journal of Religion* 82 [January 2002]: 27). According to Irenaeus, Polycarp was instructed by the apostles and had conversed with many who had seen Christ. Irenaeus specifically mentions that Polycarp was associated with the apostle John (*Haer.* 3.3.4; cf. *Hist. eccl.* 4.14).

⁴⁵*Hist. eccl.* 5.20.8. Charles E. Hill argues that the *Epistle to Diognetus* was also written by Polycarp, but this theory is based largely on circumstantial evidence and remains unproven (*From the Lost Teaching of Polycarp: Identifying Irenaeus' Apostolic Presbyter and the Author of Ad Diognetum*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.186 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006]).

⁴⁶Scholars usually date the document near the death of Ignatius because in the letter Polycarp assumes that Ignatius is dead (*To the Philippians* 1.1; 9.1 [hereafter, *Phil.*) and asks for more definite information about his martyrdom (*Phil.* 13.2). Hartog argues that the epistle was written c. 115 (*Polycarp and the New Testament*, pp. 169, 238). On the basis of Polycarp's knowledge of Ignatius's death when he wrote the earlier chapters of the book and his question about Ignatius's fate near the end of the book, P. N. Harrison argues that the epistle was originally two separate letters (chaps. 1–12 and 13–14) that were written by Polycarp roughly two decades apart (P. N. Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians* [London: Cambridge University Press, 1936]; see also Drobner, *Fathers of the Church*, p. 52). For critiques of Harrison's thesis, see Hartog, *Polycarp and the New Testament*, pp. 148–69; Michael Holmes, "Polycarp of Smyrna, Letter to the Philippians," *Expository Times* 118 (November 2006): 60–62. L. W. Barnard argues that Harrison is correct about the document being comprised of two separate letters, but he proposes that the two letters were written much closer together ("The Problem of Saint Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians," *Church Quarterly Review* 163 [1962]: 421–30). For additional discussion about the date of the epistle, see *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, s.v. "Polycarp of Smyrna," by M. W. Holmes, pp. 934–35.

⁴⁷Polycarp states, "I am writing you these comments about righteousness, brothers, not on my own initiative but because you invited me to do so" (*Phil.* 3.1). Although Polycarp's discussion of righteousness comprises the majority of the letter (*Phil.* 2–10),

admonitions in the form of a *Haustafel*, he urges all of the Philippians to live righteously and to follow the example of faithful martyrs like Ignatius, Zosimus, and Rufus who endured to the end.⁴⁸ Polycarp notes that these martyrs were able to suffer for Christ because “they did not love the present world but the one who died on our behalf and was raised by God for our sakes.”⁴⁹ This statement alone does not reveal much about Polycarp’s understanding of the nature of the atonement. But it does suggest that Polycarp understands Christ’s resurrection as a part of his work “for our sakes.” Christ died and was raised to life for the sake of his people.

Earlier in the letter Polycarp praises the Philippians for their “firmly rooted faith” which bears fruit to “our Lord Jesus Christ, who endured for our sins, facing even death.”⁵⁰ This statement indicates that Polycarp views Christ’s suffering and death as more than a mere demonstration of his love.⁵¹ Polycarp interprets Christ’s death as necessary because of human sins. Elsewhere he describes Christ as “the guarantee of our righteousness” and the one “who bore our sins in his own body on the tree.”⁵² Polycarp does not explain exactly how Christ’s death secures salvation, but he clearly sees Christ bearing human sins on the cross. Like Barnabas, he does not speak about sin in this context as a force or a power to which people are in bondage. Rather he describes Christ bearing actual sins. Polycarp notes that Christ bore our sins on the cross “in order that we might live in him.”⁵³ This suggests that apart from Christ’s death, humans could not “live in him.” If the atonement secures life in Christ, it implicitly rescues people from death or from life apart from Christ. Either way, in Polycarp’s thought, Christ’s act of bearing human sins rescues humans from the penalty which their sins deserve.

near the end of the letter he briefly turns his attention to the conduct of Valens, a man who had apparently misused church funds (*Phil.* 11). The remainder of the letter is comprised of the introduction (*Phil.* 1) and concluding remarks (*Phil.* 12–14). Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Polycarp are taken from Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*.

⁴⁸*Phil.* 9.1. The *Haustafel* appears in *Phil.* 4.2–6.1, where Polycarp discusses the responsibilities of wives, widows, deacons, young men, young women, and presbyters.

⁴⁹*Phil.* 9.2.

⁵⁰*Phil.* 1.2.

⁵¹Contrast Polycarp’s view with James Alison’s claim that Christ’s death was simply a demonstration of God’s love intended to reveal that all human sacrificial systems are worthless (“God’s Self-Substitution and Sacrificial Inversion,” in *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], pp. 166–79, see esp. pp. 166, 170, 172–73, 179).

⁵²*Phil.* 8.1. In the latter quote, Polycarp is clearly citing 1 Pet 2:24, which states, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are taken from the *English Standard Version*.

⁵³*Phil.* 8.1.

JUSTIN MARTYR

Although not a particularly polished or systematic writer, Justin Martyr is generally regarded as one of the most important of the ancient apologists.⁵⁴ A native of Flavia Neapolis in Samaria, Justin was born c. 100.⁵⁵ What little is known about his life comes mostly from statements in his own writings and from an account of his martyrdom.⁵⁶ In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin relates how he encountered an older Christian man who challenged him with the truth of the gospel.⁵⁷ Justin was converted c. 133, and several years later he established a school in Rome where the curriculum likely centered around the study of the OT Scriptures.⁵⁸ Justin was executed along with several of his pupils in Rome c. 165.

Eusebius lists eight works written by Justin, but only three of these are extant.⁵⁹ None of Justin's extant writings are specifically focused on

⁵⁴Concerning Justin's writing style, Quasten comments, "Justin follows the inspiration of the moment. He digresses, his thought is disjointed, he has a failing for long-spun sentences. His whole manner of expression lacks force and seldom attains to eloquence or warmth of feeling. Yet, for all their shortcomings, his writings hold for us an unlimited attraction. They reveal and open and honest character, which tries to reach an understanding with the opponent.... He is the first ecclesiastical writer who attempts to build a bridge between Christianity and pagan philosophy" (*Patrology*, 1:197-98). Philip Schaff refers to Justin as "the most eminent among the Greek Apologists of the second century" (*History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2 [reprint of 5th ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996], p. 712). Eric Osborn calls him "the greatest of the apologists" (*Justin Martyr*, Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 47 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1973], p. 13).

⁵⁵Due to several statements about Justin that appear in Eusebius, L. W. Barnard concludes that Justin was born in either the late first century or the early second century. Osborn thinks Justin was born in the early second century (L. W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr: His Life and Thought* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967], p. 5; *Hist. eccl.* 4.11, 16; Osborn, *Justin Martyr*, p. 6).

⁵⁶For brief overviews of Justin's life, see Craig D. Allert, *Revelation, Truth, Canon and Interpretation: Studies in Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae, vol. 64 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 27-31; Barnard, *Justin Martyr*, pp. 1-13.

⁵⁷*Dial.* 3-9. For discussion about Justin's conversion, see M. J. Edwards, "On the Platonic Schooling of Justin Martyr," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 42 (April 1991): 17-34; Anthony J. Guerra, "The Conversion of Marcus Aurelius and Justin Martyr: The Purpose, Genre, and Content of the First Apology," *Second Century* 9 (Fall 1992): 171-87; Oskar Skarsaune, "The Conversion of Justin Martyr," *Studia Theologica* 30 (1976): 53-73.

⁵⁸David E. Aune, *The Westminster Dictionary of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2003), p. 257.

⁵⁹*Hist. eccl.* 4.18. Justin's three extant works are his *First Apology*, his *Second Apology*, and his *Dialogue with Trypho*. Most patristic scholars agree that Justin's *Second Apology* was originally an appendix or a later addition to his *First Apology* rather than a separate document (Osborn, *Justin Martyr*, pp. 10-13; Quasten, *Patrology*, 1:199). Discussion of alternate theories about the relationship of these two works can be found in Aune, *Westminster Dictionary*, pp. 257-58. In addition to the works listed by Eusebius, Irenaeus mentions that Justin wrote a book titled *Against Marcion*. Other than the brief quote which Irenaeus provides, nothing of this text has survived (*Haer.* 4.6.2).

the doctrine of the atonement. However, several statements appear in his *Dialogue with Trypho* that provide some insight into how he viewed the cross of Christ.⁶⁰

After arguing that Jesus is Israel's promised Christ, Justin records an objection raised by Trypho:

Be assured that all our nation waits for Christ; and we admit that all the Scriptures which you have quoted refer to Him.... But whether Christ should be so shamefully crucified, this we are in doubt about. For whosoever is crucified is said in the law to be accursed, so that I am exceedingly incredulous on this point. It is quite clear, indeed, that the Scriptures announce that Christ had to suffer; but we wish to learn if you can prove it to us whether it was by the suffering cursed in the law.⁶¹

Trypho rightly recognizes that the Hebrew Scriptures pronounce a curse upon anyone who is hung on a tree.⁶² But he cannot imagine

Eusebius also mentions a work by this name, but he appears to have confused it with Justin's *First Apology* (*Hist. eccl.* 4.11.9; cf. *First Apology* 26 [hereafter, *1 Apol.*]). Justin himself mentions that he wrote another work "against all heresies" (*1 Apol.* 26). For further discussion of Justin's lost works, see Edgar J. Goodspeed, *A History of Early Christian Literature*, rev. and enl. Robert M. Grant (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 101–5.

⁶⁰Justin's *Dialogue* is allegedly a summary of a conversation that took place between Justin and Trypho, a Jew whom he met in Ephesus (*Dialogue with Trypho* 1 [hereafter, *Dial.*]; cf. *Hist. eccl.* 4.18). However, Justin may have created both the dialogue and his opponent for the sake of literary form. For discussion of dialogue as a literary genre in early Christianity, see Drobner, *Fathers of the Church*, pp. 82–83. Scholars have debated the intended audience of Justin's *Dialogue*. Traditionally, the document has been viewed as written for a Jewish audience. However, a few scholars have argued for either a pagan or a Christian audience. Due to Justin's strong emphasis on the Law, the Jewish messianic hope, and Israel as the chosen people of God, it seems likely that he intended the work to be read primarily by Jews. But in light of his own role as a teacher in the Christian community, he probably realized that some Christians would also read it. For helpful discussion of the purpose and intended audience of Justin's *Dialogue*, see Allert, *Revelation, Truth, Canon and Interpretation*, pp. 37–61. And for an argument in favor of a non-Christian Gentile audience, see Jon Nilson, "To Whom Is Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* Addressed?" *Theological Studies* 38 (September 1977): 538–46. In the *Dialogue*, Justin refers to his *First Apology* (*Dial.* 120.5). Therefore, the *Dialogue* was probably written between c. 150 (when his *First Apology* was written) and c. 165. The discussion of Justin which follows is largely indebted to Williams, "Critical Exposition of Hugo Grotius's Doctrine of the Atonement," pp. 75–77 and Jeffery, Ovey, and Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, pp. 164–66.

⁶¹*Dial.* 89. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Justin Martyr are taken from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. In some citations spelling has been updated to reflect modern English.

⁶²Deut 21:22–23 states, "if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God." Although the text just cited states that the curse of God resides upon anyone who is hung on a tree, it does not specifically mention a cross. This could cause some readers to question whether or not the curse would apply to Christ. However, Paul clearly interprets this text from Deuteronomy as referring to Christ's death on the cross: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'" (Gal 3:13).

Christ bearing the curse of Yahweh. This idea does not fit his conception of the promised Messiah. Justin responds by noting that Christ died because of the sins which humans have committed: "If Christ was not to suffer, and the prophets had not foretold that He would be led to death on account of the sins of the people, and be dishonored and scourged, and reckoned among the transgressors, and as a sheep be led to the slaughter...then you would have good cause to wonder."⁶³ But Trypho still objects to the idea that Christ could suffer the curse of God upon him. So Justin explains, "Just as God commanded the sign to be made by the brazen serpent, and yet He is blameless; even so, though a curse lies in the law against persons who are crucified, yet no curse lies on the Christ of God, by whom all that have committed things worthy of a curse are saved."⁶⁴ Justin points out that Christ was not cursed by God because of any wrong which he committed for he was sinless. Rather he died upon a cross in order to save those who have committed things worthy of a curse. Justin further explains,

For the whole human race will be found to be under a curse. For it is written in the law of Moses, "Cursed is every one that continues not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them." And no one has accurately done all, nor will you venture to deny this; but some more and some less than others have observed the ordinances enjoined. But if those who are under this law appear to be under a curse for not having observed all the requirements, how much more shall all the nations appear to be under a curse who practice idolatry, who seduce youths, and commit other crimes?⁶⁵

Therefore, Justin asks,

If, then, the Father of all wished His Christ for the whole human family to take upon Him the curses of all, knowing that, after He had been crucified and was dead, He would raise Him up, why do you argue about Him, who submitted to suffer these things according to the Father's will, as if He were accursed, and do not rather bewail yourselves?⁶⁶

A number of interesting statements about the death of Christ appear in this dialogue between Justin and Trypho. Both men agree that the Hebrew Scriptures pronounce a divine curse upon anyone who is crucified.⁶⁷ But Trypho cannot believe that the true Messiah could be cursed by God, and for this reason, among others, he does not think Jesus can be the Christ. Justin points out that all people fail to keep the law of God and therefore are cursed by God for their disobedience. But he argues that Jesus was sinless and therefore did not bear the

⁶³ *Dial.* 89.

⁶⁴ *Dial.* 94.

⁶⁵ *Dial.* 95.

⁶⁶ *Dial.* 95.

⁶⁷ For additional discussion of the concept of being cursed by God, see Williams, "Critical Exposition of Hugo Grotius's Doctrine of the Atonement," pp. 73–75.

curse of God for anything which he had done. Instead Christ was able to suffer for the sins of people and to take upon himself the divine curses which rightly belonged to sinful humans. Justin sees Christ's death, therefore, as involving a penal atonement for sins. Christ bore the "curses of all" because all sinners had earned the curse of God. As Garry Williams writes, Justin "offers an articulation of the Penal doctrine which distinguishes carefully between the blasphemous claim that Jesus was cursed in his own right (and so was guilty of his own sins), and the claim which lies at the heart of the universal human hope, that Jesus bore the curse due to the sin of the world."⁶⁸ While Clement, Barnabas, and Polycarp provide examples of early believers who viewed Christ's death as a substitution for sinners, Justin is likely the first second-century writer to explicitly affirm that Christ bore the divine punishment for human sins upon the cross.

EPISTLE TO DIOGNETUS

This short letter which J. B. Lightfoot calls "the noblest of early Christian writings" is filled with doctrinal significance quite out of proportion to its length.⁶⁹ Although an apologetic work, this document is usually placed among the Apostolic Fathers and dated in the second half of the second century.⁷⁰ Unlike most other early Christian

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 76–77.

⁶⁹J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1876), p. 156.

⁷⁰The epistle was preserved in a single manuscript (*Codex Argentoratensis*) which was discovered c. 1436 by Thomas d'Arezzo among some wrapping papers in a fish market in Constantinople. This manuscript eventually ended up in the library of Strassburg where it was destroyed on August 24, 1870 when the library caught fire during the Franco-Prussian war. Fortunately several copies of the manuscript were made and housed elsewhere before it was destroyed (Paul Foster, "The *Epistle to Diognetus*," *Expository Times* 118 [January 2007]: 162–63; Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 291; Henry G. Meecham, *The Epistle to Diognetus: The Greek Text with Introduction, Translation and Notes* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1949], pp. 68–69).

The date one assigns to the document is inevitably tied to the question of authorship. Concerning this latter issue, many different names have been suggested. The lost manuscript mentioned above, itself probably dated from the fourteenth century. It attributed the document to Justin Martyr, but this attribution is almost certainly incorrect. One of the more interesting proposals for authorship of the letter has come from Charles Hill who argues at length that the *Epistle to Diognetus* was written by Polycarp (Hill, *From the Lost Teaching of Polycarp*). If Hill is correct, this would place the letter no later than the 150s when Polycarp was martyred. Although quite interesting, Hill's thesis probably can not be sustained, and we are left with a date in the latter half of the second century. For an argument that the letter was written after 176, see Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), p. 178. Further complicating the issues of authorship and dating is the possibility that the final two chapters of the text were originally a separate document and perhaps even written by someone else (L. W. Barnard, "The Epistle ad Diognetum: Two Units from One Author?" *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 56 [1965]: 130–37; Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, pp. 290–91). Hill argues for the unity of the letter, but most scholars believe the final two chapters belong to another document (Hill, *From the Lost Teaching of Polycarp*, pp. 106–27). The discussion in this essay focuses on material from

literature, this document is not written to believers.⁷¹ Instead the author writes to an individual unbeliever. In terms of literary form, the document is a letter addressed to Diognetus. Nothing is known about Diognetus's identity beyond what appears in this letter.⁷² He is apparently an unbeliever who is curious about the Christian religion.

At the beginning of the letter, the writer lists three key questions which Diognetus has posed concerning the Christian faith. The letter begins,

Since I see, most excellent Diognetus, that you are extremely interested in learning about the religion of the Christians and are asking very clear and careful questions about them—specifically, what God they believe in and how they worship him, so that they all disregard the world and despise death, neither recognizing those who are considered to be gods by the Greeks nor observing the superstition of the Jews; what is the nature of the heartfelt love they have for one another; and why this new race or way of life has come into the world we live in now and not before—I gladly welcome this interest of yours, and I ask God, who empowers us both to speak and to listen, that I may be enabled to speak in such a way that you will derive the greatest possible benefit from listening, and that you may listen in such a way that the speaker will have no regrets.⁷³

The rest of the document is a reply to these three questions.

The author of the letter argues that the worship of both pagans and Jews is foolishness.⁷⁴ Both groups are deceived about the nature of true religion. He then explains the distinctives of the Christian religion. He notes that Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of society based on country, language, or custom.⁷⁵ However, Christians are different from their neighbors in terms of moral behavior and religious beliefs.⁷⁶ The writer describes the ethical conduct which

the main body of the letter, and therefore the question of the document's unity does not have a significant bearing on the present argument.

⁷¹Holmes remarks that this letter "is unique among the Apostolic Fathers in that it is addressed not to insiders, or fellow believers, as are the rest of the documents in the collection, but to outsiders" (*Apostolic Fathers*, p. 288). Most of the NT documents are also written to believers, with John's Gospel and Luke-Acts being the most likely exceptions.

⁷²The author may have created Diognetus as a hypothetical interlocutor or have placed questions in the mouth of a real person in the literary form of a Platonic dialogue. However, there is nothing in the text itself that suggests that either one of these possibilities is the case.

⁷³*Diognetus* 1 [hereafter, *Diogn.*]. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from the *Epistle to Diognetus* are taken from Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*.

⁷⁴*Diogn.* 2–4.

⁷⁵*Diogn.* 5.1.

⁷⁶The author writes, "They marry like everyone else, and have children, but they do not expose their offspring. They share their food but not their wives. They are in the flesh, but they do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws; indeed in their private lives they transcend the laws. They love everyone, and by everyone they are persecuted" (*Diogn.* 5.6–11).

Christians are marked by, and he explains several of their key doctrinal views.

The letter displays a high Christology. For example, the author points out that God revealed divine truth to humans “not, as one might imagine, by sending them some subordinate, or angel, or ruler or one of those who manage earthly matters, or one of those entrusted with the administration of things in heaven, but the Designer and Creator of the universe himself.”⁷⁷ He recognizes that Christ is not a subordinate being somewhat less than deity but rather the Creator of the universe. Yet he acknowledges Christ’s genuine humanity as well. He writes, “[God] sent him in gentleness and meekness, as a king might send his son who is a king; he sent him as God; he sent him as a human to humans.”⁷⁸

The writer views Christ’s coming to earth as part of God’s sovereign plan. He writes, “But when our unrighteousness was fulfilled, and it had been made perfectly clear that its wages—punishment and death—were to be expected, then the season arrived during which God had decided to reveal at last his goodness and power.”⁷⁹ The author affirms that sin merits both punishment and death. But he notes that God “did not hate us, or reject us, or bear a grudge against us; instead he was patient and forbearing; in his mercy he took upon himself our sins; he himself gave up his own Son as a ransom for us, the holy one for the lawless, the guiltless for the guilty, the just for the unjust, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal.”⁸⁰ While sinful humans were deserving of punishment and death, God displayed his mercy toward them by sending Christ to bear their sins. The writer does not say that on the cross Christ took upon himself a “quasi-autonomous power that holds people groups as well as individuals in bondage.”⁸¹ Nor does he seem to think that Christ died primarily to rescue sinners from “the cosmic powers that keep us in bondage to sin.”⁸² Instead the author of this letter views Christ taking upon himself the sins which humans have committed and bearing the punishment and death which those sins deserve.

Therefore, the writer continues,

For what else but his righteousness could have covered our sins? In whom was it possible for us, the lawless and ungodly, to be justified, except in the Son of God alone? O the sweet exchange, O the incomprehensible work of God, O the unexpected blessings, that the sinfulness of many should be hidden in one righteous person, while the righteousness of one

⁷⁷*Diogn.* 7.2.

⁷⁸*Diogn.* 7.4.

⁷⁹*Diogn.* 9.2.

⁸⁰*Diogn.* 9.2.

⁸¹Contra Boyd, “Christus Victor View,” p. 29.

⁸²*Ibid.*

should justify many sinners!⁸³

The author believes that through the atoning work of Christ the sins of many have been hidden in Christ and his righteousness has been given to them in exchange. He recognizes that no one else could have died for sins and that Christ's death takes away the "punishment and death" which human sins had earned. This is the incomprehensible work of God by which sinners are not merely set free from the power of sin but are also forgiven and released from the punishment which their sins deserve. The *Epistle to Diognetus* provides a clear example of belief in penal substitution at a very early point in church history.

IRENÆUS

Born c. 130, Irenaeus has been called "by far the most important of the theologians of the second century."⁸⁴ Like Justin Martyr, what little is known about Irenaeus's life comes primarily from his own writings. Even Eusebius appears to have been dependent upon Irenaeus's works for information about his life.⁸⁵

Having spent part of his early life in Smyrna where he studied under Polycarp, Irenaeus later moved to Gaul where he became bishop of the church in Lyons (c. 178).⁸⁶ From his position at Lyons, Irenaeus wrote his most important work, *Against Heresies*, during the 180s. This work, which comprises five books, was written to combat Gnosticism, particularly that of an influential teacher named Valentinus.

Irenaeus is sometimes viewed by scholars as an early proponent of Christus Victor.⁸⁷ Such scholars point out that a number of times in his *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus speaks about Christ's redemptive work as

⁸³*Diogn.* 9.3–4.

⁸⁴Quasten, *Patrology*, 1:287. Quasten lists Irenaeus's birth between 140 and 160, but most others sources have c. 130. Irenaeus is usually thought to have died c. 200 (*Dictionary of Historical Theology*, s.v. "Irenaeus of Lyons [c. 130–c. 200]," by Douglas B. Farrow, p. 273; Drobner, *Fathers of the Church*, p. 117).

⁸⁵*Hist. eccl.* 5.4–8. For discussions of Irenaeus's life, see Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, Early Church Fathers (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1–10; Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 1–7.

⁸⁶Although Irenaeus ministered in the West, he was able to both think and write in Greek and brought an eastern mindset to bear on western problems due to having spent several decades in the East. He thus formed an important link between the eastern and western church fathers.

⁸⁷Aulén spent one of his eight lectures on the atonement discussing Irenaeus's view (*Christus Victor*, pp. 32–51). See also Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1997), p. 150; H. E. W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption: A Study of the Development of Doctrine during the First Five Centuries* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1952), p. 67. Peter Schmiechen notes that "since the publication of Gustaf Aulén's *Christus Victor* in 1931, the name of Irenaeus has been synonymous with the theme of Christ's victory over sin and demonic powers" (*Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005], p. 125).

defeating Satan and setting humanity free. For example, he describes Christ “waging war against our enemy, and crushing him who had at the beginning led us away captives in Adam.”⁸⁸ A little later, while discussing Christ’s temptation in the wilderness, Irenaeus notes that Satan “enticed man to transgress his Maker’s law, and thereby got him into his power; yet his power consists in transgression and apostasy, and with these he bound man.”⁸⁹ But Irenaeus believes that such a situation is not permanent for “when Satan is bound, man is set free.”⁹⁰ Irenaeus declares that this liberation was achieved by Christ:

And justly indeed is [Satan] led captive, who had led men unjustly into bondage; while man, who had been led captive in times past, was rescued from the grasp of his possessor, according to the tender mercy of God the Father, who had compassion on His own handiwork, and gave to it salvation, restoring it by means of the Word—that is, by Christ—in order that men might learn by actual proof that he receives incorruptibility not of himself, but by the free gift of God.⁹¹

Here Irenaeus clearly affirms that Christ has defeated Satan and set humans free. Some scholars have read these passages and have concluded that Irenaeus viewed the work of Christ as primarily directed at “the powers which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death, and the devil.”⁹² Yet Christ’s victory over Satan is not the totality of Irenaeus’s teaching on the redemption of sinners.⁹³

While Irenaeus’s theology includes the idea of *Christus Victor*, much more central to his theology is the idea that Christ recapitulates humanity and thereby reverses the effects of Adam’s sin.⁹⁴ Irenaeus sees Christ passing through every stage of human life in order to do perfectly for sinners what they could not do for themselves.⁹⁵ He believes

⁸⁸*Haer.* 5.21.1. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Irenaeus are taken from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson.

⁸⁹*Haer.* 5.21.3.

⁹⁰*Haer.* 5.21.3.

⁹¹*Haer.* 5.21.3.

⁹²Aulén, *Christus Victor*, p. 36.

⁹³As Warfield correctly comments, “In the patristic age men spoke with such predilection of the work of Christ as issuing in our deliverance from the power of Satan that the false impression is very readily obtained from a cursory survey of the teaching of the Fathers that they predominantly conceived it as directed to that sole end” (Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Samuel G. Craig [Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1950], p. 355).

⁹⁴Olson refers to the doctrine of recapitulation as “Irenaeus’ most notable contribution to the history of doctrine” (Mark Jeffrey Olson, *Irenaeus, the Valentinian Gnostics, and the Kingdom of God [A.H. Book 5]: The Debate about 1 Corinthians 15:50* [Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1992], p. 88). For discussion of Irenaeus’s concept of recapitulation as it relates to his eschatology, see Christopher R. Smith, “Chiliasm and Recapitulation in the Theology of Irenaeus,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 48 (December 1994): 313–31.

⁹⁵*Haer.* 3.18.7. Because he sees Christ passing through every stage of human life,

that Christ lived a sinless life which culminated in his death upon the cross on behalf of sinners. The reason why Christ needed to die for sinners becomes clearer as Irenaeus explains the nature of fallen humanity's condition and Christ's redemptive work.

Irenaeus notes that the apostasy which tyrannized humanity did so unjustly because "we were by nature the property of the omnipotent God."⁹⁶ Although humanity's alienation from God was contrary to the created order, God chose not to redeem sinners by brute force. Instead he determined to rescue humanity "by means of persuasion, as became a God of counsel, who does not use violent means to obtain what He desires; so that neither should justice be infringed upon, nor the ancient handiwork of God go to destruction."⁹⁷ Irenaeus suggests that God would be unjust if he redeemed sinners by sheer power. He then explains how God justly redeemed sinners: "The Lord thus has redeemed us through His own blood, giving His soul for our souls, and His flesh for our flesh."⁹⁸ Irenaeus sees redemption as a result of Christ dying as a substitute for sinners offering up his life in exchange for their lives. Such a substitution was necessary because of the depth to which humankind had fallen.

Irenaeus asserts that humanity became subject to death by means of Adam's fall. He points out that "along with the fruit they did also fall under the power of death, because they did eat in disobedience; and disobedience to God entails death."⁹⁹ On that day, Irenaeus states Adam and Eve "became death's debtors."¹⁰⁰ But humanity's debt was not ultimately owed to "death" as an impersonal principle, much less was it owed to Satan. Rather Irenaeus recognizes that sin plunged humanity into debt to God. And this debt could only be paid through the cross. He writes, "As by means of a tree we were made debtors to God, [so also] by means of a tree we may obtain the remission of our

Irenaeus asserts that Christ lived to be an "old man" and was crucified at about the age of fifty (*Haer.* 2.22.4–6). He writes, "Being a Master, therefore, He also possessed the age of a Master, not despising or evading any condition of humanity, nor setting aside in Himself that law which He had appointed for the human race, but sanctifying every age, by that period corresponding to it which belonged to Himself. For He came to save through means of Himself—all, I say, who through Him are born again to God—infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men. He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants.... So likewise He was an old man for old men, that He might be a perfect Master for all" (*Haer.* 2.22.4).

⁹⁶ *Haer.* 5.1.1.

⁹⁷ *Haer.* 5.1.1.

⁹⁸ *Haer.* 5.1.1.

⁹⁹ *Haer.* 5.23.1.

¹⁰⁰ *Haer.* 5.23.2. Hans Boersma incorrectly sees "a relatively minor role for the Fall in Irenaeus's thought" (*Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004], p. 120). Compare the similar statement in J. T. Nielsen, who says, "The fall is to Irenaeus hardly more than an intermezzo" (*Adam and Christ in the Theology of Irenaeus of Lyons* [Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1968], p. 62).

debt.”¹⁰¹ This debt is not owed to anyone but God for as Irenaeus declares “we were debtors to none other but to Him whose commandment we had transgressed at the beginning.”¹⁰² Likewise he states, “He is our Father, whose debtors we were, having transgressed His commandments.”¹⁰³ Humans did not sin against Satan but rather against their Creator. Therefore, Irenaeus sees sinners as in debt to the God against whom they rebelled.

But Irenaeus holds that sinners were not merely debtors to God, they were also his enemies. He writes,

Now this being is the Creator (*Demiurgus*) who is, in respect of His love, the Father; but in respect of His power, He is Lord; and in respect of His wisdom, our Maker and Fashioner; by transgressing whose commandment we became His enemies. And therefore in the last times the Lord has restored us into friendship through His incarnation, having become “the Mediator between God and men;” propitiating indeed for us the Father against whom we had sinned, and cancelling (*consolatus*) our disobedience by His own obedience.¹⁰⁴

Irenaeus describes fallen humans as God’s enemies, but he declares that Christ “has restored us into friendship through His incarnation.”¹⁰⁵ This suggests that as a result of the fall all sinners were in a hostile relationship to God. Irenaeus explains how Christ made peace between the two hostile parties when he describes Christ “propitiating indeed for us the Father against whom we had sinned.” Irenaeus ties the need for propitiation to humanity’s sin against God, and he sees Christ offering up propitiation to the Father through his obedience. This obedience which Christ performed on behalf of humanity includes both his sinless life and his death on the cross. Through his work on behalf of sinners, Christ propitiated the Father and reversed the disobedience of Adam.

In the end, Irenaeus sees the work of Christ encompassing at least two different images. Irenaeus views Christ as God the Son who became incarnate in order to defeat Satan as a member of the human race. Yet Irenaeus also sees Christ as a substitute dying for sinners and thereby propitiating God’s wrath toward fallen humanity. This second

¹⁰¹ *Haer.* 5.17.2. Unless otherwise noted, bracketed material in *Against Heresies* is provided by the translators.

¹⁰² *Haer.* 5.16.3.

¹⁰³ *Haer.* 5.17.1.

¹⁰⁴ *Haer.* 5.17.1.

¹⁰⁵ Irenaeus’s emphasis on the incarnation of Christ should be read in light of his overall purpose which was to explain and refute Gnosticism. Chief among the Gnostic beliefs was the idea that Christ did not possess a genuine human body and therefore did not really suffer on the cross (see e.g., *Haer.* 1.9.3; 2.20.3; 3.11.3; 3.16.1). Throughout much of *Against Heresies* Irenaeus argues for the reality of the incarnation in order to demonstrate that Christ actually suffered on the cross. As he sees it, if Christ did not become genuinely incarnate then he could not have undone the effects of humanity’s sin.

image is an essential part of Christ's work in Irenaeus's atonement theology, and it is one that has often been overlooked by scholars such as Aulén. Irenaeus views the work of Christ as involving not only *Christus Victor* but also a substitutionary atonement for sins which propitiates the wrath of God toward sinners.

CONCLUSION

While many writers have argued that a Latin view of the atonement was not fully developed until Anselm in the eleventh century and did not appear at all before Tertullian, this essay has demonstrated that a number of second-century church fathers embraced the essential components of a Latin view earlier than such scholars have acknowledged. These early fathers used a variety of images to describe Christ's work on behalf of sinners. And among these images can be found a clear understanding of the death of Christ as a substitutionary atonement for sinners in which he gave "his flesh for our flesh." Although none of the second-century fathers authored a treatise on the atonement, their writings reveal a common assumption that Christ died in the place of sinners, bearing their sins and the punishment which their sins deserve in order to secure divine forgiveness. Aulén's thesis concerning the near unanimity of the *Christus Victor* view in the early church is therefore untenable in light of numerous patristic affirmations of a vicarious atonement.