

A. RANSOM model : Origen – C2nd

Man, having yielded to the [temptations](#) of [Satan](#), was like to one overcome in battle. Sin is like being in a state of slavery. So if Christ's death set man free from sin, this could be compared to the way that a captive is set free by the payment of a ransom.

When a captive is ransomed, the ransom-price is paid to the one who holds him captive – in this case, the devil. St. Irenaeus writes that Christ, as the Second Person of the Trinity, “*dealt justly even with Satan, buying back from him the things which were His own.*” Origen later took up this idea, that Christ's life was given up in ransom paid to the devil, but that in doing so, the devil had been tricked, because he had been hooked by the bait of the divine nature of Christ, but it would not be possible for him to have ownership over God, or to bear the torture of keeping him. St. Augustine agrees with Origen, saying that Christ “*deceived the deceiver*” and “*The Lord's cross was the devil's mousetrap: the bait which caught him was the death of the Lord.*”

Problem:

- this theory gives the devil a lot of power: the devil holds God to ransom, that God must pay to release His own creation. Surely God is sovereign and all-powerful Lord, owing nothing to anyone?
- It is odd to think of God acting in a deceitful way, even to the devil, as Origen and Augustine think (but not Irenaeus).
-

B. DEBT-SATISFACTION model : St. Anselm – C11th

Anselm adapts Origen's Ransom model. He wrote a book “*Cur Deus Homo?*” (Why did God become Man?) where he considers why it was necessary for Jesus to be incarnated as a man and die a human death, in order to save us. Couldn't God have just decided to forgive us?

Anselm rejects the idea that God is a cruel tyrant who would delight in, and require, the blood of his Son, as penalty for sin. He also rejects the idea that God requires the sacrifice of an innocent life, because he is otherwise unable to forgive the guilty, or that he has to “buy off” the devil. For this reason, he rejects the ransom model. The devil has acted unjustly against us, in leading us to sin, and therefore does not have any rights against us.

Anselm suggests instead that **humanity owe a debt** – not to the devil, but **to God**. Having sinned against God, they have refused to give God the obedience and love he deserves. Humanity needs to repay God the debt, and return to God the honour due to him. Unfortunately, no human being can do this, because all are sinful. There is no-one who can honour God with a sinless and obedient life, and even if there were, that would only be returning to God no more than is due to him – it would fail to further honour him.

For this reason, the Son of God became man, to pay the debt humanity owed to God. He lived the sinless, fully obedient life to offer to God something that would **honour** God far more than a mere human life – the self-offering of the divine Person itself. By dying as an offering to God, Jesus **satisfied the debt** and restored to God the honour that was due to him, winning from God an overabundance of God's favour (superogation of merit) which he passes on to us. The human debt could only be paid by a human, but God could only be honoured by something greater – hence the need for the sacrifice of a God-man.

Problem:

- the idea of restoring honour was typical in feudal society, where peasants and serfs had to show their obedience and service to their overlords, and owed them for being their protector on their land. It is not a biblical model of relationships, and so perhaps inappropriate to see Jesus' death in this way.

C. PENAL SUBSTITUTION model : Protestant Reformers – C16th

The Protestant Reformers emphasise Jesus' identification with sinful humanity, so that his death was a substitution for our death, which is the logical consequence of sin (we die naturally, but our sins bring us to spiritual death). As the Son of God, his sacrifice on our behalf was unique, and forever effective.

The Reformers argue that Jesus had to die, not only because he was substituting himself for us, but because only this would satisfy God's wrath against sinners. Breaking even one commandment is going against God himself, as the law expresses God's character. Sin cannot be overlooked, as it offends against the holy God. It has to be atoned for. God's justice requires that that we deserved to be punished for sin, but since He is also a merciful God, God himself becomes the substitute that carries the punishment, in Jesus. Jesus is like the Passover lamb, whose blood saved the Jews from punishment of the 10th plague; or like the slaughtered goat of the Day of Atonement, whose blood shed had a purifying effect for the people.

NT quotes that support this include:

- “We considered him as someone punished, struck by God and afflicted. But he was pierced through for our faults, he was crushed for our sins ...on him lies a punishment that brings us peace... we, like sheep, had gone all gone our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the sins of us all...harshly dealt with, he bore it humbly.” (Isa 53:4-6 - text of the Suffering Servant)
- “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, by becoming a curse for us” (Gal 3:13)

Problems:

- in emphasizing God's justice exacting punishment, the atonement is seen in terms of the criminal justice system, with God presented as a vengeful, wrathful judge, seeking to satisfy his sense of justice and express his judgement on human sin. It ignores the injustice that an innocent person is receiving the punishment.
- It is a model rooted in violence. It makes it seem that the son is split from the Father, and has to “save us” from the Father's wrath: but the Trinity is one, and it is incorrect to think of Christ as loving and forgiving, but the Father as punishing. God is shown as merciful and forgiving, in the act of substituting his son as his own self for us, but not in the way that we see Jesus is treated.
- It also doesn't make sense of why the resurrection happened: if what mattered was Jesus dying as a substitute victim, why wasn't the cross the end of the story? In fact the whole story of Jesus' life, and the fact of the resurrection, suggest that Jesus' achievement was not primarily to allay God's anger, but to offer human beings new life in the transforming power of God, which frees us from a sinful life.
- There are in fact examples of God forgiving unconditionally: the Our Father prayer assures us of forgiveness if we forgive others. Acts 8:22 advises: “Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you“. There is no logic that forgiveness must be obtained by punishment.

D. CHRISTUS VICTOR model : Gustav Aulen – C19th

200 years before Jesus, there was an increasingly held view by Jews, that the world was held hostage by evil powers. Satan was seen as the real ruler of this world, possessing all kingdoms and giving authority to rule over them. Aulen argues that Jesus saw his mission to be wresting control from the devil, and reclaiming God's creation for God. We are saved, when we are liberated from the grip of evil, and our destruction due to our sins, is nullified. Jesus defeats the powers of evil by living a life of complete obedience to God and self-sacrifice. He confronts evil, injustice and discrimination at every level (racism, sexism, legalism & judgmentalism of the Pharisees), healing people and performing exorcisms, even to the point of his own arrest and crucifixion: these are acts of war against destructive powers, as well as examples for us to follow. Jesus' sacrifice is not a price paid to the devil, but the necessary cost of waging war against the powers of evil. In the OT history of Israel, God handed the nation Israel over to her enemies, in punishment for her sins – in the NT, Jesus is similarly "handed over" by God to death, not only as a substitute victim of God's anger, but to defeat these powers (the resurrection). Salvation is seen as liberation from evil powers. This theory depicts God as truly loving, acting in his Son for our freedom. However, it also shows the real, objective nature of evil, and the very real suffering that comes in the struggle against it.

OT/ NT quotes:

Psalm 110: "The LORD says to my lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."

John 12:31 "Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out."

Ephesians 6:12 (St.Paul): "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Colossians 2:15: "And having disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. "

Problems:

- This view downplays the notion of individual responsibility and our guilt against God – Jesus acts on a cosmic level against the forces of evil, and our personal sin is not really the issue that he comes to deal with.
- The model does not explain why the victory over Satan brings forgiveness of sins.
- It is also difficult to explain why Jesus must sacrifice himself on this model: although Jesus' sacrifice does defeat the devil's temptation against selfishness and disobedience (witness Jesus' struggle in Gethsemane), it is not itself an act of warfare that takes back control from the devil.
- Jesus' ministry was arguably more about proclaiming the Kingdom of God to people, than being primarily about spiritual warfare, although this was involved.

E. MORAL EXAMPLE model: Popular with C20th Modern Liberal Theologians (though the inspirational aspect was originally suggested by Augustine C4th and later Abelard C11th)

The Enlightenment in the 18th century was a time when people began to turn to science, and accept only reason as the way to truth. If something did not make sense to reason, it was pushed aside (eg doctrine of the Trinity). Similarly, Jesus was seen more as just a human teacher, and an inspirational role model, an example for self-improvement.

Moral example theories do not see Jesus' death on the cross as achieving any spiritual victory, or mysteriously freeing us from sin, or making a difference to anyone else. These are seen as superstitions from a bygone age. Rather, Jesus' death shows the extent of God's love, in being willing to be put to death, while still forgiving us. Since only individuals are responsible for their own actions, and no-one else can do anything on our behalf, Jesus' death is only effective if it inspires to become better people, living more unselfishly for others. It also inspires us to a deep love of Jesus, and this love is a source of strength for us to act against evil and sin.

Problem:

- If Jesus' death was one of the most powerful moral examples known to man, and an ultimate source of wisdom in living well, it doesn't make sense of how the atrocities of the 20th century could have taken place. It is very doubtful that knowledge can save the human race.
- It takes a very narrow view of the universe, as a mechanical and materialistic system, excluding spiritual realities.