

## ***Crux Sola est Nostra Theologia: Luther's Theology of Atonement and its Development in Recent Theology on the Cross of Christ***

Robert Falconer<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper aims to demonstrate the relationship between Luther's atonement theology and the work of recent theologians who have in one way or another fostered and development his theology on the cross of Christ. I argue that Luther's theology has shaped much of recent atonement theology. His theology was grounded in the earlier theological traditions as well as in scripture, and yet it was informed by specific spiritual, historical, theological and sacramental contexts. Some theologians have identified the *Christus Victor* motif as Luther's theology of atonement, without consideration for the other themes. Others, on the other hand, have focused on *satisfactio*<sup>2</sup> or/and *penal*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

<sup>2</sup> All references to satisfaction are in Latin (*satisfactio*), when direct reference is made to Anselm or Luther's theology and is not in quotation.

<sup>3</sup> I put *penal* in 'penal substitution' in italics when mentioned in relation to Luther's theology, because while we see some aspect of it in primitive form in his work, the

substitution as Luther's major theme, neglecting the *Christus Victor* motif altogether. However, it is argued that the development of Luther's atonement theology is far more variegated and inclusive of the various themes. Luther made the cross the very centre of his theology, evident in his 1518 Heidelberg Disputation. But his theology of atonement is really more fully articulated in his commentary on Galatians 3:13 and in both his small and large catechisms. It is then demonstrated how in some recent theologians' work, the themes of atonement have become far more varied and composite than they have since Luther. It is not unreasonable to view Luther as a significant influence on recent atonement theology. Beginning with Gustaf Aulén, the discussion explores ways in which Luther's atonement theology has shaped today's theology on the cross of Christ.

## 1. Introduction

The Magisterial Reformer, Martin Luther, saw all his theology through the lens of the cross. One might say that his new sola was, *crux sola est nostra theologia* – 'the cross alone is our theology'. Evidently, 'Luther summoned not just theologians but theology itself to the cross' (McKnight 2007:52–53). This paper aims to demonstrate the relationship between Luther's atonement theology and the work of recent theologians who have fostered and development his theology on the cross of Christ. Luther's theology of the atonement has, therefore, shaped much of recent atonement theology. To begin with, I will examine the origin or context of Luther's understanding of the

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penal substitutionary theory was only developed later in detail. Luther's theology here is more clearly 'substitutionary' than it is 'penal substitutionary'.

atonement, which will in turn bring us to its development, exploring the atonement in four of his written works. In the last discussion, six theologians were selected, five of which are contemporary, all of whom I believe have fostered Luther's atonement tradition, making significant contributions to recent atonement theology.

## 2. Origin of Luther's Atonement Theology

### 2.1. Introduction

Luther's theology of atonement was distinct in its day, even though it remained grounded in the earlier theological traditions. While grounded firstly in Scripture, as one would expect, his theology on the atonement was also birthed from specific spiritual,<sup>4</sup> historical, theological and sacramental contexts which were foundational to his understanding.

### 2.2. Spiritual

Initially, while being a monk, Luther felt the agony and burden of his sense of sin. Shaw and Edwards explain that from the time he became a monk in 1505, Luther had a long hard struggle with a belief that he was never worthy to stand in the presence of God. In an effort to relieve himself from the extreme sense of guilt and condemnation, he did all he could that the Roman Catholic Church had to offer (2011:77). These attempts in prayers, fasting, vigils and good works, meant to satisfy God and offer relief from such condemnation, were in vain. George, comments that upon noting Luther's extreme religious behaviour, his spiritual advisor and confessor, Johannes von Staupitz, directed him towards 'the wounds of the most sweet Saviour', in an attempt to save

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<sup>4</sup> *Anfechtungen* is the German word for Luther's spiritual struggle and dark nights of the soul which was especially formative of his teaching and ministry.

him from despair. It was 'by pointing Luther to the cross, that Staupitz had "started the doctrine"' (2004:265), the doctrine of atonement, and justification that so fired the reformation.

## 2.3. Historical

In his recent book, Wright points out that the greatest Reformers, Luther as well as Calvin drew from scripture and the writings of the Patristics, in order 'to develop fresh ways of speaking about Jesus's death'. This, Wright believes, Luther and Calvin had in common with Anselm's theology (Wright 2016:27). In this way, Luther, not only drew theology from scripture, but also from the Patristics,<sup>5</sup> which demonstrates the historical nature of the origin of Luther's theology of the atonement. There was, however, according to Green and Baker, a shift in the legal framework that 'signals the main difference between Anselm's *satisfactio* model and the penal substitution model'. They believe this was evident in Luther as well as Calvin. Neither, however, developed in detail a comprehensive theology of *penal* substitutionary atonement, but made use of other atonement motifs. Many of which seem to be rooted in the social-cultural context of Luther (and Calvin). An example, as Aulén (1931) claims, is that Luther put greater emphasis on the *Christus Victor* motif than on a substitutionary model<sup>6</sup> (2000:142), having been influenced by the social-cultural milieu of the German medieval period—a fear of spirits and devils.

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<sup>5</sup> Aulén highlights this as well when he wrote that, for Luther, the atonement, 'is the patristic view that has returned; but it has returned with greater depth and force than before' (1931:108).

<sup>6</sup> Whether Luther put greater emphasis on the *Christus Victor* motif than on a *penal* substitutionary model, is up for debate.

## 2.4. Theological

While developing a theology that remained grounded in the earlier theological traditions, Tillich observed how Luther's method of theology was quite different from that of the Fathers of the Church. For him Christology was central (1967:249). Aulén picked up on how Luther's atonement theology can be 'understood'<sup>7</sup> as a revival of the old classic theme of the Atonement as taught by the Fathers,<sup>8</sup> but with a greater depth of treatment' (1931:102). Not too dissimilar from the Patristics, Luther employs violent and grotesque imagery, and realistic picture language to describe Christ's conflict with the devil<sup>9</sup> (Aulén 1931:103). Yet, as Aulén explains, the significance of Luther's theology on the atonement is not so much in its imagery, but rather in the following; (1) he expresses himself with tremendous care and precision, clearly evident in the Catechisms, but always returns to the dramatic view.<sup>10</sup> (2) He offers profound clearness in his 'statements of the meaning of the atonement in dramatic terms give the very essence of the Christian faith; they are *capitalia nostrae theologiae*' (the capital of

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<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, Aulén seems to make this exclusive by stating that, 'Luther's teaching can *only be rightly* understood as a revival of the old classic theme of the Atonement as taught by the Fathers' (emphasis mine). But nevertheless, the old classic theme of the atonement is a significant part of Luther's atonement theology, but it is by no means the only part.

<sup>8</sup> By 'the old classic theme of the Atonement as taught by the Fathers', Aulén means the *Christus Victor* motif.

<sup>9</sup> Aulén offers an example, showing how Luther, 'describes how it was the Lord of glory, not a mere man, who was crucified; but God concealed this fact from the devil, or he would never have dared assault him. God acts like fisherman, who binds a line to a fishing-rod, attaches a sharp hook, fixes on it a worm, and casts it into the water. The fish comes, sees the worm but not the hook, and bites, thinking that he has taken a good morsel; but the hook is fixed firm in his gills and he is caught. So God does; Christ must become man; God sends him from high heaven into the world, where the devil finds him (p. 103) like "a worm and no man" (Ps. xxii.6), and swallows him up' (Aulén 1931:103–104).

<sup>10</sup> a.k.a the *Christus Victor* motif.

our theology). (3) Perhaps most significantly, this 'dramatic view of the work of Christ stands in organic relation with his theological outlook as a whole' (Aulén 1931:104). It is anomalous that Aulén identifies the classic theme as Luther's almost singular theme of the atonement, neglecting other striking themes that play a role in Luther's theology. For example, there is also revision and development from Anselm's *satisfactio* theology. Shaw and Edwards (2011:80) explain that, where 'Anselm had argued that the choice for God was punishment or satisfaction', Luther taught that in Christ's death, he bears the punishment for sin, 'and because punishment is paid, justice is satisfied'.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.5. Sacramental

In Luther's day, *satisfactio* was related to the medieval *sacramentum paenitentiae*, 'sacrament of penance'. He felt that this sacrament belonged to the legal profession, and had wished for it to be abolished from Christian theology altogether. For him (and this is where he differs with Anselm, and despite his revision and development of his *satisfactio* theology) the whole concept of *satisfactio* was very much a part of the penitential system that he scorned because he believed that it obscured the Gospel (Luther's Works vol.30:29; Aulén 1931:118, 120–121; George 2004:273; McDonald 1985:183). This contributed towards Luther's revision on Anselm's *satisfactio* theory.

## 2.6. Conclusion

Luther's atonement theology was by no means developed in a void without relationship to particular contexts, namely, (1) his own spiritual experiences, (2) grounding his theology in the Patristics, and earlier

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<sup>11</sup> cf. Falconer 2013.

theologians, (3) while still drawing from earlier theological traditions, he allows his theology to have its one distinct flavour, and (4) his sacramental concerns. In the discussion which follows, the development of Luther's atonement theology will be examined.

### 3. Development of Luther's Atonement Theology

#### 3.1. Introduction

Theologians in the past have identified the *Christus Victor* motif as Luther's atonement theology, without consideration of other themes, others on the other hand have focused on *satisfactio* or *penal* substitution as Luther's major theme, neglecting the *Christus Victor* motif altogether. However, the development of Luther's theology is far more variegated and inclusive of various themes. From the start, Luther made the cross the very centre of theology, evident in his 1518 Heidelberg Disputation. Although his theology of atonement was more fully articulated in his commentary on Galatians 3:13 and in his small and large catechisms.

#### 3.2. Heidelberg Disputation, 1518

Luther was called upon to explain and defend his 'new theology'. This defence took the form of the Heidelberg Disputation at the lecture hall of the Augustinian Order in 1518, a year after nailing the 95 Thesis to the Wittenberg church door. In these days such a defence included public debate and discussion (Forde 1997:19).

Although the Heidelberg Disputation does not develop an atonement theology *per se*, George explains that it begins to articulate Luther's 'new and deeper understanding of the cross' which was the heart of his theology, a *theologia crucis*. Nevertheless, Luther's theology and more

specifically his atonement theology was shaped by contrasting the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross, evident in Theses 19-21 of the Heidelberg Disputation (2004:265).<sup>12</sup>

In his short book, Forde (1997:9, 12, 15) offers helpful commentary, he writes of how Luther argued that 'a theology of glory always leaves the will in control', seeking 'to make its theology attractive to the supposed "free will"'. On the other hand, for the theologian of the cross, 'the will is bound and must be set free'.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, 'Theologians of the cross attacked the way of glory, the way of law, human works, and free will, because the way of glory simply operates as a defence mechanism'. Conversely, the theologian of glory considers 'curing addiction by optimistic exhortation' and 'the theologian of the cross knows that the curse is much more drastic'<sup>14</sup>, says Forde.

The cross of Christ for Luther is firstly 'God's attack of human sin', and secondly (and ultimately) salvation from sin. But we must see this as God's 'strange attack—to suffer and die at our hands'. Luther called this an 'alien work'. For the theologian of the cross, God works directly through the 'horror of the cross'. This alien work of the cross reflects back on us, exposing our own lives that we might become humble, rather than prideful (Forde 1997:1, 35).

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<sup>12</sup> Theses 19–21 of the Heidelberg Disputation reads as follows:

19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the 'invisible' things of God as though they were clearly 'perceptible in those things which have actually happened' (Rom 1:20; cf. 1 Cor 1:21–25),

20. he deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

21. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is (Luther 1518: online).

<sup>13</sup> cf. Luther's, *The Bondage of the Will*.

<sup>14</sup> cf. Luther's commentary on Galatians 3:13.



### 3.3. Commentary on Galatians 3:13

Luther begins his attack on the theology of glory in 1516–1517, lecturing on Paul’s letter to the Galatians. His work was revised in 1535. The commentary on Galatians 3:13 develops a detailed atonement theology, even before the Heidelberg Disputation. According to George, this is ‘a key passage in his most important biblical commentary’ and many of his chief ideas of Christ’s atoning work find expression here (2004:264, 269). Rutledge is correct, it is erroneous to limit Luther’s atonement theology to one theme (2015:482).<sup>15</sup> His Commentary on Galatians 3 makes this quite clear, especially verse 13, where we see substitutionary<sup>16</sup> and *Christus Victor* themes at play. Although Luther handles several atonement themes, I argue that substitution and the *Christus Victor* motif are foremost in his theology. These two themes seem to be the fruit of deep consideration of the theology found in the Patristics and to some extent Anselm’s theology (Shaw and Edwards 2011:78).<sup>17</sup>

George notes how many Luther scholars have found Aulén’s attempt to impose a rigid typology, namely the *Christus Victor* motif, on Luther’s theology unconvincing (George 2004:268). As we will see, Luther does

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<sup>15</sup> contra. Aulén (1931).

<sup>16</sup> Arguably even a primitive version of *penal* substitution. Wright (2016:240) offers an interesting approach when he says, ‘The passage, then, declares that the “exile” is over—because the “curse” has fallen on the Messiah himself, the single representative of Israel, and has thereby been exhausted. To use traditional language for a moment, this is undoubtedly “penal” (you can’t get more “penal” than the Deuteronomic curse), and it is undoubtedly “substitutionary” (the Messiah’s accursed death means that others are no longer under the curse). But this form of “penal substitution” has little or nothing to do with the narrative in which that theory is normally found. That narrative says the oblique language of the scripture passage being quoted is just a roundabout way of saying, “We sinned, God punished Jesus, and we are all right again”’.

<sup>17</sup> Remembering that ‘Luther’s way of theologizing about the atonement is very different from that of Anselm’ (George 2004:270).

advocate a *Christus Victor* motif in his commentary on Galatians 3:13, but he does this with a robust theology of substitutionary atonement as well. Luther writes,

‘Paul does not say that Christ was made a curse for Himself. The accent is on the two words “for us” (*für uns*). Christ is personally innocent. Personally, He did not deserve to be hanged for any crime of His own doing. But because Christ took the place of others who were sinners’<sup>18</sup> (Luther 1539<sup>19</sup>:114; emphasis mine).

Luther continues to explain, ‘*Des Todes und der ewigen Verdammnis schuldig*’, ‘we are guilty of death and eternal condemnation’ (my translation).<sup>20</sup> However, he continues to proclaim that Jesus took our sins and then died on the cross for them, in this way he bore the sins of many<sup>21</sup> and was numbered among the transgressors<sup>22</sup> (Luther 1539:114).

Since Jesus was now a transgressor, the *Fluch des Gesetzes*, ‘curse of the law’ struck him. Luther explains how Jesus was not only in the company of sinners, but that ‘he had gone so far as to invest Himself

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<sup>18</sup> This is most clearly stated in Luther’s *Galaterbrief-Auslegung von 1531*, „Der ganze Nachdruck liegt auf dem Wörtchen „für uns“. Christus ist, was seine Person angeht, unschuldig. Folglich mußte er nicht am Holze hangen, aber, weil jeder Räuber nach dem Gesetz ans Holz gehörte, darum mußte Christus nach dem Gesetz des Mose ans Holz gehängt werden, weil er die Person des Sünders und Räuber, nicht eines Einzelnen, sondern aller Sünder und Räuber vertreten hat“ (Luther 1980:168).

<sup>19</sup> Although Luther’s Commentary on Galatians 3:13 was revised in 1535, according to *The Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, the translation by Justus Menius appeared in the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s writings, and published in 1539. I will therefore use 1539 as the date of publication in my citations and Reference list.

<sup>20</sup> The official English translation reads, ‘The sentence of death and everlasting damnation had long been pronounced over us’ (Luther 1539:114).

<sup>21</sup> cf. Luther cited in McDonald 1985:183.

<sup>22</sup> cf. Is 53:12

with the flesh and blood of sinners. So the Law judged and hanged Him for a sinner' (Luther 1539:114–115). For Luther, the atoning work of Christ as sin-bearer was so complete that he 'actually became "the greatest thief, murderer, adulterer, robber, desecrator, blasphemer, etc, there has ever been anywhere in the world"'<sup>23</sup> (Shaw and Edwards 2011:79). In other words, as Luther proclaims, Jesus substituted himself, taking all the sins of the world upon himself, utterly defiling his sinlessness. All sins that were committed and will be committed become Christ's sins, as if he himself had committed them. If Christ did not take our place by owning our sins, we would perish forever (Luther 1539:115). As a result, the law destroys Christ and we go free (Luther 1539:116).

The idea of merit was abhorrent to Luther, seeing the tremendous blessings that come from Christ's sufficient work on the cross (McDonald 1985:183). This is evident when Luther, with magnificent proclamation writes, 'When we hear that Christ was made a curse for us (*Christus war für uns ein Fluch gemacht*), let us believe it with joy and assurance. By faith Christ changes places with us. He gets our sins, we get His holiness'. And in the very next sentence, Luther weaves in the *Christus Victor* motif, as if the two belong together, saying, 'if you believe that sin, death, and the curse are void, they are null, zero. Whenever sin and death make you nervous write it down as an illusion of the devil. There is no sin now, no curse, no death, no devil because Christ has done away with them'<sup>24</sup> (Luther 1539:118). It is evident then

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<sup>23</sup> Again, Luther's *Galaterbrief-Auslegung von 1531* is striking, „Daß der zukünftige Christus der größte Räuber, Mörder, Ehebrecher, Dieb, Tempelschänder, Lästterer etc. Sein würde, der durch keinen Verbrecher in der Welt je übertroffen wird“ (Luther 1980:168).

<sup>24</sup> The German reads, „Wenn du glaubst, daß Sünde, Tod und Fluch abgetan sind, sind sie abgetan; Christus hat diese Mächte in sich selbst überwunden und abgetan, und er will, daß wir glauben, daß, wie in seiner Person hinfort keine Gestalt des

that Luther's *Christus Victor* motif which is so celebrated by Aulén, was accompanied by *penal* substitutionary notions (Boersma 2004:159). But be that as it may, the *Christus Victor* motif in Luther's atonement theology is *still* very much significant and powerful. Indeed, Rutledge (2015:482) observes,

In much of Protestantism the *Christus Victor* theme that was so prominent in Luther was reduced in importance, with greater emphasis being put on justification by faith and imputed righteousness. Aulén succeeded in redirecting attention to Luther's robust proclamations: "Christ's victory ... the overcoming of the Law, of Sin, our flesh, the world, the devil, death, hell, and all evils; and this victory has given to us." In his preface to the New Testament Epistles, Luther writes, "In these books [John, 1 Peter, and Paul's Epistles] you will find a masterly account of how faith in Christ conquers Sin, Death, and Hell; and gives life, righteousness, and salvation. *This is the true essence of the gospel.*"

In Luther's commentary on Galatians 3:13, employing vivid imagery, he recounts how 'sin is a mighty tyrant who subdues all men' and that 'this tyrant pounces on Christ', but the righteousness of Christ is unconquerable, resulting in the utter defeat of sin whereby 'righteousness triumphs and reigns forever'. Death is dealt the same blow. While death is the destroyer of life, 'Christ has immortal life, and life immortal gained the victory over death'. Death cannot destroy those who hide in Christ, for he is the 'Death of death'. Sin, death, the wrath of God, hell, and the devil are thus mortified in Christ (Luther 1539:116). Towards the end of his commentary on Galatians 3:13, Luther joins the concept of *Christus Victor* together with an element of Anselm's *satisfactio* theory found in his *Cur Deus Homo*. He explains

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*Sünders mehr ist, keine Spur des Todes, so ist auch in unserer Person nichts mehr davon, da er alles für uns vollbracht hat etc.* " (Luther 1980:171).

that ‘to overcome the sin of a whole world, and death, and the wrath of God was no work for any creature’. Only a greater power could break the power of sin and death. ‘God alone could abolish sin, destroy death, and take away the curse of the Law. God alone could bring righteousness, life, and mercy to light. In attributing these achievements to Christ the Scriptures pronounce Christ to be God forever’ (Luther 1539:117).

### 3.4. The Small and Large Catechisms

Luther wrote two catechisms. The Small Catechism, *Der kleine Katechismus*, for the training of children, and the Large Catechism, *Der große Katechismus*, was for the clergymen, specifically to help them teach their congregations. These are divided into five parts, (1) the Ten Commandments, (2) the Apostles' Creed, (3) the Lord's Prayer, (4) Baptism, and (5) the Eucharist.<sup>25</sup> In the discussion which follows I will highlight Luther's atonement theology in both catechisms.

As one might expect, Luther emphasises a kind of spiritual struggle with the devil, but that Christ has purchased his people and has won the victory, delivering them from all sins. This *Christus Victor* motif, is evident in the second article of the Apostle's Creed in the *Small Catechism* when he says, Jesus Christ,

my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won [delivered] me from all sins,<sup>26</sup> from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy,

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<sup>25</sup> The Small Catechism includes ‘Confession’ as an additional part. Both catechisms were published in 1529. cf. Luther 1983.

<sup>26</sup> For Luther, by the divine love of Christ sin was laid upon him (Luther's Works vol. 26:279).

precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, in order that I may be [wholly] His own.<sup>27</sup>

The *Larger Catechism* develops this further, explaining that Christ had, 'redeemed me from sin, from the devil, from death, and all evil' (*Daß er mich erlöst hat von der Sünde, vom teufel, vom Tod und allem Unglück*; Luther 1983:95). But that before we were captive to the devil's power and 'condemned to death'. For though we had been created by God and had received good, the devil deceived man 'and led us into disobedience, sin, death, and all evil' and as a result we bear the wrath<sup>28</sup> and displeasure of God and are 'doomed to eternal damnation, as we had merited and deserved'.<sup>29</sup> But central to the article is Jesus 'who has brought us from Satan to God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness, and who preserves us in the same'. The motif, however, changes soon after to that of *satisfactio* where Luther writes that Christ suffered, died and was buried, in order that he would make satisfaction<sup>30</sup> for us (our sins<sup>31</sup>) and pay what we owe by means of his

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<sup>27</sup> The second article of *Der kleine Katechismus*, reads as follows, „Sei mein Herr, der mich verlornen und verdammten Menschen erlöst hat, erworben, gewonnen von allen Sünden, vom Tode und von der Gewalt des Teufels; nicht mit Gold oder Silber, sondern mit seinem heiligen, teuren Blut und mit seinem unschuldigen Leiden und Sterben; auf daß ich sein eigen sei“.

<sup>28</sup> Wright notes that, 'Luther's protest of 1517 thus kept the medieval picture of God's wrath, but insisted that this wrath was quenched by God's love through the death of Jesus' (2016:30).

<sup>29</sup> In the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer in the *Small Catechism*, 'And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us' (cf. Matt 6:9–6:13; Luke 11:2–11:4.), Luther writes, „... denn wir täglich viel sündigen und wohl eitel Strafe verdienen“ (Luther 1983:139).

<sup>30</sup> According to George (2004:727), in order to 'distance Luther from the Latin view of the atonement, Aulén played down the concept of satisfaction in Luther's understanding of the cross' (cf. McDonald 1985:183).

<sup>31</sup> “He has and bears all the sins of all men in his body—not in the sense that he has committed them but in the sense that he took these sins, committed by us, upon his

own blood. He did this not for himself but for us (one might say as a substitution). Although Anselm taught that God either inflicted *poenae*, ‘penalty’ or provided a *satisfactio*, Luther on the other hand argued that God chooses both, that Christ in his death ‘bears all the sins of all men in his body’ and bearing our *poenae* makes ‘satisfaction for them with his own blood’. It is nevertheless true that Luther on several accounts criticises the word *satisfactio*, because of its connotation to the medieval sacrament of penance’ (George 2004:273). Punishment is paid and his justice is satisfied! (Luther’s Works vol.26:277; Falconer 2013:52). Luther then orientates his reader to the *Christus Victor* once again, proclaiming,

And after that he rose again from the dead, swallowed up and devoured death, and finally ascended into heaven and assumed the government at the Father’s right hand, so that the devil and all powers must be subject to him and lie at his feet, until finally, at the last day, he will completely part and separate us from the wicked world, the devil, death, sin, etc.<sup>32</sup>

Boersma notes that Aulén has pointed out how Luther was intensely aware of the spiritual battle that was fought in Christ’s life and death and that the battle continues to be fought today in the lives of Christians (2004:193). This is laid out graphically by Luther here, especially in the sixth petition of the Lord’s Prayer in the *Larger Catechism*, when he says that the devil comes, ‘inciting and provoking in all directions’, and that, ‘These are indeed snares and nets, yea, real fiery darts which are

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own body, in order to make satisfaction for them with his own blood”’ (Luther quoted in George 2004:273).

<sup>32</sup> The German reads, „Darnach ist er wieder auferstanden, hat den Tod verschlungen und vertilgt, und ist zuletzt gen Himmel gefahren und hat die Herrschaft zur Rechten des Vaters übernommen. Nun muß ihm der Teufel und alle Gewalt untertan sein und zu Füßen liegen, so lange, bis er uns schließen am Jüngsten Tag ganz von der bösen Welt, von Teufel, Tod, Sünde usw“ (Luther 1983:96).

shot most venomously into the heart, not by flesh and blood, but by the devil'. But as the *Small Catechism* so patently says, 'though we be assailed by them, that still we may finally overcome and gain the victory'. We have victory only because Christ is the Victor.<sup>33</sup> George explains that this is likely Luther's main contribution to the theology of atonement, bringing together *satisfactio* and *penal* substitution, as well as the cross of Christ being 'the scene of Satan's definitive defeat and the object basis of justification by faith alone' (2004:275).

### 3.5. Conclusion

Having explored Luther's atonement theology in the 1518 Heidelberg Disputation, his exposition on Galatians 3:13 and the Small and Large Catechisms, perhaps Rutledge (2015:483) says it best when she wrote that Luther, 'typically refers to the "combat" that Christ undertook against Sin, the Law, Death, and the devil.' However, Luther's reflections on this 'combat suggests that *the way that Christ became the Victor was through his death on our behalf and in our place*'.

It is no doubt evident then, that Luther developed a theology shaped by the cross,<sup>34</sup> *crux sola est nostra theologia* (McKnight 2007:61), however, it is argued by McKnight that it is deficient. Rightly, he wishes to add the resurrection and Pentecost. Rather than *crux sola*, Knight argues for a *crux et*, the cross, the resurrection *and* Pentecost, and these he believes should be 'set into the incarnation and the manifestation of God in the ecclesial community' (2007:53). Moltmann on the other hand sees Luther's *theologia crucis* as 'a radical

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<sup>33</sup> This work of victory, as Shaw and Edwards (2011:82) reminds us, 'is only possible if Christ's work is one of propitiation'.

<sup>34</sup> cf. Moltmann 1993:72, 212.



development of the doctrine of the incarnation with a soteriological intent'<sup>35</sup> (Moltmann 1993:212).

Luther did not have only one theory of the atonement, but developed an atonement theology that encompasses as many biblical themes as were available to him, especially *penal* substitution and the *Christus Victor* motif, and even to some extent, Anselm's *satisfactio* theory (George 2004:277). Boersma (2004:159) notes how subsequent theologians have worked at combining various atoning themes, especially, Luther's *Christus Victor* motif, celebrated by Aulén, and synthesised with substitutionary concepts.<sup>36</sup> This leads us to the next discussion, where we will explore briefly the impact of Luther's atonement theology on contemporary theologians' understanding of the cross of Christ.

## 4. Recent Theology of the Cross of Christ

### 4.1. Introduction

Boersma (2004:182–183) mentions that Luther had studied the works of Gregory the Great and recovered the concept of *Christus Victor*. Luther's successor, Melancthon, however, taking a juridical approach, developed the '*penal* substitutionary view of the atonement that has been characteristic of Protestantism ever since'. And as Boersma has pointed out this is changing. The themes of atonement have become far more varied and composite. Having looked at Luther's theology it is not unreasonable to view him as the influence of recent atonement theology. Beginning with Gustaf Aulén, this discussion will explore ways in which Luther's atonement theology has shaped recent theology on the cross of Christ.

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<sup>35</sup> cf. Luther's Works 128:36

<sup>36</sup> This is evident in my own work (cf. Falconer 2013).

## 4.2. Gustaf Aulén

It is fair to say that Luther's theology of the atonement really begins shaping contemporary theology on the cross of Christ some years after the publication of Aulén's little book, *Christus Victor: an historical study of the three main types of the idea of atonement*, published in 1931. Rutledge correctly says that, 'Aulén's contribution has been massive'. He placed Luther's 'robust reaffirmation of the biblical and patristic *Christus Victor*' motif at the centre of Luther's atonement theology. Rutledge understands Aulén's account of Luther's atonement theology as having particular features of apocalyptic theology, namely, (1) 'God as the acting subject', (2) 'the cosmic and universal nature of the apocalyptic drama', (3) 'the presence of hostile Powers that must be defeated', (4) 'the conclusive defeat of the enemy by God's messianic agent', (5) 'the arrival of something altogether new' (2015:362).

Aulén called the *Christus Victor* motif, the classical idea, having been taught by the patristics<sup>37</sup>, and the satisfaction theme (later developed as penal substitution) he called the Latin idea or the objective view, and Abelard's atonement theme of moral influence was the subjective theory. From Aulén's writings, he seemed to suggest that Luther's focus was only on the classic idea, or at least this is very much primary, almost to the exclusion of other atoning themes. He also understood the classical idea as 'that which is most genuinely Christian' (Aulén 1931:158).

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<sup>37</sup> Stott highlights that the Western Fathers believed in the *Christus Victor* motif together with the Eastern Fathers, but usually alongside the 'objective' view, these included Ambrose and Augustine, and Popes Leo the Great and Gregory the Great. However, it is argued that the *Christus Victor* motif lost some traction by medieval Catholic scholasticism, but Luther had revived it and that later 'Protestant scholasticism lost it again and reverted to the Anselmian notion of satisfaction' (Stott 1989:266).

Aulén was very critical of Anselm's teaching of *satisfactio*, calling it, 'juridical' (a concern of Luther's as well). He dismissed it scornfully as merely a deviation or 'sidetrack in the history of Christian dogma' (Stott 1989:266).<sup>38</sup> Notwithstanding, Aulén's significant contribution was drawing the attention of the church towards the cross as victory, demonstrating that the cross was not only about sin and guilt, but also death and the evil powers (Stott 1989:267).<sup>39</sup>

Aulén was persuaded that no Christian teaching will have any future if it does not take seriously 'the reality of the evil in the world, and go to meet the evil with a battle-song of triumph'. For this reason, he believed that the classic view, the *Christus Victor* motif, would make a comeback, but added that if this view 'ever again resumes a leading place in Christian theology, it is not likely that it will revert to precisely the same forms of expression that it has used in the past' (Aulén 1931:158–159). As we will discover in the work of the following theologians, Aulén's predictions have come true, though perhaps not quite as he might have envisioned.

### 4.3. Gregory Boyd

Gregory Boyd, is arguably the theologian who has most developed Aulén's emphasis of the *Christus Victor* motif for many years, but now, in 2017 his theology finds full expression in his *magnum opus*, titled, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*. Sounding almost like Luther's, *Crux Sola est Nostra Theologia*, Boyd writes how 'Jesus is the centre and the circumference of the Bible while the cross is the centre and circumference of Jesus' (Boyd 2017:227). Further, for him, the cross of

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<sup>38</sup> (cf. Aulén 1931:31)

<sup>39</sup> No doubt for Aulén such a theme was relevant 'in a century torn apart from two World Wars and in a European culture aware of demonic forces' (Stott 1989:267).

Christ 'is the revelation of God's judgment'. He argues that when we think about how God judges, how he loves or how he does anything, we must begin with the cross. The cross of Christ is therefore 'the supreme revelation of God' (Boyd 2017:online).

When asked in an interview whether the cross, the supreme revelation of God, subordinates the life, ministry, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, Boyd reaffirmed the cross as the centre of the Kerygma and that rather than opposing Jesus' life, ministry, resurrection and ascension, it weaves it all together into a 'thematic thread' (Boyd 2017:online). He calls this a 'the cruciform (or cruci-centric) hermeneutic'. Focusing on the *Christus Victor* motif, Boyd (1997:240), in an earlier publication maintains that,

The anthropological significance of Christ's death and resurrection is rooted in something more fundamental and broad that God was aiming at: defeat once and for all his cosmic archenemy, Satan, along with the other evil powers under his dominion, and thereby to establish Christ as the legitimate ruler of the cosmos, and human beings as his legitimate viceroys upon the earth.

Similar to Wright's atonement theology as we shall see, Boyd acknowledges Jesus' substitutionary death for sinful humanity as central to an understanding of what he did for us on the cross, but that this element of Christ's atoning work is only made possible precisely because of the cosmic victory that Christ had won on the cross (1997:241). In other words, the work of the cross is, therefore, 'about dethroning a cruel, illegitimate ruler and reinstating a loving, legitimate one: Jesus Christ ... we are saved because he is victorious'. Salvation is then the direct consequence of Jesus through the cross having overcome the powers of evil, and this cosmic victory is our personal salvation (Boyd 1997:246, 250).

#### 4.4. Hans Boersma

Boersma offers a fascinating account of the atonement where he explores the questions that surround ‘hospitality reconciliation’ in Christ and his atoning work. For Boersma, atonement theology is about an ‘expression of God’s hospitality toward us’ (Boersma 2004:15–16). More than anything else, it is in the cross that ‘we see the face of the divine host: the true love of God’. As Boersma himself says, his work on the atonement is all about the face of God and ‘his hospitality towards us in giving himself in Christ’ (Boersma 2004:16).

Boersma affirms Traditional atonement theology, a theology that includes the satisfaction theory, penal substitution and the *Christus Victor* motif and even the moral influence theory of Abelard. He argues that this theology ought not be abandoned because of its divine violence, but that ‘the paradox of redemptive violence in order to retain the vision of eschatological unconditional hospitality’ ought to be affirmed (Boersma 2004:17).

The renewal of the *Christus Victor* motif, Boersma believes, is a positive contribution to the recent developments of atonement theology (Boersma 2004:199). Yet, he argues that the atonement models are not independent of each other, nevertheless, victory is the purpose of the atonement, satisfaction and the moral influence models are ‘the means by which God ultimately defeats evil and upholds his eternal and unconditional hospitality’.<sup>40</sup> The *Christus Victor* motif, therefore, offers enough reason as ‘warrant of divine hospitality’ (Boersma 2004:201).

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<sup>40</sup> I have said this differently, ‘penal substitution is the means of atonement, and *Christus Victor* is its purpose’ (Colossians 1:12–14; 2:12–15; 3:18–22; Falconer 2015:148).

## 4.5. NT Wright

The New Testament scholar, NT Wright understands the cross as central to the Christian message, as well as Christian life and mission. It is at this moment of crucifixion, in which on the behalf of others, sins would be forgiven and evil would be robbed of its power and people would be redeemed making them ‘worshippers and stewards, celebrating the powerful victory of God in his Messiah and so gaining the Spirit’s power to make his kingdom effective in the world’. Wright urges his readers to ‘forget the “works contract,” with its angry, legalistic divinity. Forget the false either/or that plays different “theories of atonement” against one another’. But that we are to instead embrace the ‘covenant of vocation’, ‘reflect the image of God and to celebrate that the power of love has overcome the love of power’ (Wright 2016:416).<sup>41</sup>

Although Wright encourages his readers to leave behind the false either/or of the various atonement theories, he himself is compelled to accept the *Christus Victor* motif as the overarching theory<sup>42</sup> that carried him further than the other theories into the heart of the Christian message of atonement. He argues that, once the *Christus Victor* motif is put in place ‘the other theories come in to play their respective parts’. Yet, as he notes, for Paul, Jesus’ death also includes a ‘*judicial or penal element*’ (Wright 2006:94–95).

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<sup>41</sup> This love of power is presumably Wright’s equivalent of evil which he addresses in his 2006 book publication, *Evil and the justice of God*. He describes evil as, ‘The force of anti-creation, anti-life, the force which opposes and seeks to deface and destroy God’s good world of space, time and matter, and above all God’s image-bearing human creatures. That is why death, as Paul saw so graphically in 1 Corinthians 15:26, is the final great enemy’ (Wright 2006:89).

<sup>42</sup> Wright does note, however, that the *Christus Victor* motif is not a single theory to trump all others atonement themes (Wright 2006:95; cf. 114).

Wright correctly understands penal substitution as both biblical<sup>43</sup> and patristic, but nonetheless, a conception that was revived by the Reformer's rejection of purgatory with a *new spin*. He points out that it began to focus 'not on God's kingdom coming on earth as in heaven, but on *my* sin, *my* heavenly (that is, nonworldly) salvation, and of course *my* Saviour' (Wright 2016:30, 35). However, it concerns Wright that penal substitution has contributed towards a 'paganized vision of an angry God looming over the world and bent upon blood'. Instead, he argues, Paul gave us a Jewish perspective of the 'loving, generous creator God, who gives his own very self for the life of the world' (Wright 2016:349). Contrary to Luther though, Wright sees the work of the atonement in light of Israel and its exile,<sup>44</sup> but this would require extended discussion.

#### 4.6. Scot McKnight

Similar to Wright, McKnight is persuaded that the penal substitutionary theory be immersed 'into the redemptive grace of God' (McKnight 2007:43). That is to say that penal substitution is by no means the only atonement theory, but that it sits in relationship to other themes. McKnight lists five chief metaphors of atonement, (1) recapitulation (incorporation into Christ, who recapitulated Adam's life), (2) ransom or liberation, (3) satisfaction, (4) moral influence, and (5) penal substitution,<sup>45</sup> and asks which one we should choose? He affirms that we do need to choose an appropriate atonement theme, and then develops his own golfing metaphor. Each spot on the golf course, he says is different, and we need to take the appropriate golf club from the

<sup>43</sup> cf. Wright's commentary on Rom 8:1–4 in Wright 2016:286–287.

<sup>44</sup> cf. Wright 1996 and 2017.

<sup>45</sup> One wonders why McKnight had not included the *Christus Victor* motif. But be that as it may, the *Christus Victor* motif is a development from the ransom theory.

bag<sup>46</sup> and use it (McKnight 2007:48). In other words, each socio-cultural context may call for an appropriate emphasis of a particular theme of atonement. So, like Luther<sup>47</sup> and others, there is a variety of biblical atonement theories, and we should embrace them all.

McKnight seeks to deconstruct the typical single-sided, simplistic and individualist theories of the atonement, and yet also demonstrates that the cross of Christ is indeed inseparable from Jesus' incarnation, resurrection, Pentecost and the church. Yet, the atonement he believes, is designed to resolve the cosmic problem of evil and sin (McKnight 2007:61).

Contrary to Luther, and even Boyd, McKnight (2007:60) argues that the '*crux sola* theory of atonement is inadequate', not because the cross itself is insufficient, but as he explains,

The atonement begins in the *perichoresis* of God, that eternal communion of interpersonal love, and that *perischoresis* becomes incarnate in the Son of God, the *Logos*, Christ Jesus, who assumes—hence the cross—what we are (cracked Eikons) in order to draw us into that *perischoresis*. And it is the entire life of Jesus (not to mention yet Pentecost) that creates atonement is incarnational as it sets the stage now for what happens in the cross'.

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<sup>46</sup> cf. McKnight 2007:108.

<sup>47</sup> However, McKnight does bemoan that the 'Lutheran confession framed the gospel in terms of salvation. It would not be inaccurate to say that the gospel "story became soteriology," or the Story of Israel/Bible/Jesus become the System of Salvation' ... 'not that the Reformation created that sort of Gospel, but that the Reformation's reshaping of the gospel story has made it a pale shadow of what it ought to be' (McKnight 2011:72–73).



While McKnight raises a pertinent point, perhaps Boyd is still right, the cross is what weaves all the different elements together into a glorious tapestry.

#### 4.7. Fleming Rutledge

Rutledge, an Episcopal priest, like Luther handles in detail a variety of atonement motifs, including satisfaction, sacrifice, ransom, *Christus Victor*, substitution and recapitulation. Nevertheless, she considers two categories when taken together encompass the various biblical imageries of what took place on the cross of Christ. The first category is ‘*God’s definitive action in making vicarious atonement for sin*: the cross is understood as sacrifice, sin offering, guilt offering, expiation, and substitution. Related motifs are the scapegoat, the Lamb of God, and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53’. The second category is described as, ‘*God’s decisive victory over the alien Powers of Sin and Death*: the cross is understood as victory over the Powers and deliverance from bondage, slavery, and oppression. Related themes are the exodus, the harrowing of hell, and *Christus Victor*’. Rutledge does, however, caution us to be wary of sticking too strictly to the categories, and to allow for some overlap and blending. She also warns against developing atonement theories that are overly realistic, forcing ‘the pictorial, poetic, and narrative structures of the Bible into restrictive categories’ (2015:209, 211).

Nevertheless, in light of the two categories, Rutledge correctly argues that, (1) ‘There is sin and guilt for which atonement needs to be made’, and (2) ‘There is *slavery, bondage, and oppression* from which humankind needs *to be delivered*’ (2015:216).

Similar to Luther, if one too strictly focuses their atonement theology on a law court typology, the gospel is likely to find its way into a

moralistic emphasis (Rutledge 2015:320). And it is for this reason that she, along with others already mentioned, broadens the scope of the atonement, this is evident when she writes,

The imagery of rescue and victory places the themes of reconciliation and forgiveness into another context altogether, where they are brought in under the heading of *God acting to make right what has been wrong* (rectification). Then, and only then, can the whole complex of ideas and images be located where it belongs, on the battlefield of Christ against the Powers. This is the overarching panorama against which to place the imagery of the Great Assize, or last Judgment (Rutledge 2015:347).<sup>48</sup>

She continues how it would be erroneous to interpret punishment only in terms of the wrathful image, but that we ought to relook at the idea of immunity, that is, the 'exemption from punishment', while still retaining punishment, or penalty (2015:503). Rutledge (2015:506) nevertheless criticises the penal aspect of penal substitutionary atonement,<sup>49</sup> and suggests that we rethink the substitution motif without eliminating it.

#### 4.8. Conclusion

Although all the theologians mentioned offer their own unique contribution, they reflect a continuation from Luther's variegated atonement theology. Aulén emphasised the *Christus Victor* motif, over other themes, and other theologians embraced in one way or another the substitution theme, along with others. Contemporary atonement

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<sup>48</sup> cf. Rutledge 2015:238.

<sup>49</sup> Rutledge offers numerous and detailed objections to the penal substitution model (cf. 2015:489–506). I remain unconvinced by most of these objections and consider this perhaps the main weakness of her otherwise brilliant book.

theology is no doubt indebted to Luther's theology and thus is to be celebrated.

## 5. Conclusion

Luther offers a theology where the cross of Christ alone is our theology and then develops the atoning work of Christ, summoning theologians and their theology to the cross. The paper examined the origin or context of Luther's atonement theology, as well as its development, exploring the atonement in four of his written works: The 1518 Heidelberg Disputation, his commentary on Galatians 3:13, and his small and large catechisms. I then explored six theologians who have fostered Luther's atonement tradition and have made significant contributions to recent atonement theology. Here it was demonstrated that Luther's atonement theology undergirds the theology of recent theologians who have fostered and development his theology on the cross of Christ. It was evident, that Luther's theology of the atonement has shaped much of recent atonement theology from 1931 in Aulén's work to the present.

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