

ABSTRACT

Proclaiming Atonement: A Study of Atonement, Metaphors, and Christian Preaching

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The content of the gospel is formational for the life of the church. If the church can speak more fully and fluently about the decisive moment in salvation history, it has much to gain. Yet, this has proven to be no simple task. Despite its resting place at the center of Christian theology, the doctrine of atonement is marked by historic irresolution. Preachers and parishioners alike struggle to convey how and why the death of Jesus Christ on a Roman cross brings salvation to humankind. Language of Christ's saving work appears pushed to its limits, with some seeking untenable narrowness and others embracing muddled abstractions.

Yet, Christian scriptures provide various necessary, complimentary ways of articulating the meaning and significance of the death of Jesus Christ. Language about the cross is shown to be multi-dimensional. Metaphor is revealed as the best way to think and speak about atonement. This project identifies and explores the variety of metaphors employed throughout the Bible and Christian history to explain God's saving work in Christ. In light of ongoing debates and recent postmodern critiques, this project considered how preachers might use language that avoids pitfalls of confusion and

reductionism. Through an analysis of thirty recent sermons from Baptist churches in Texas, the project provided findings concerning the current use of atonement metaphors in preaching and suggested emphases for future proclamation.

Primary findings included: 1) sermons exhibited a diversity of metaphors, 2) ransom and redemption metaphors appeared most often, 3) penal language was rarely connected with explicit retributive justice, and 4) atonement language and metaphors were frequently conflated incoherently. Secondary findings revealed: 1) sermons frequently interpreted the atonement through other biblical texts, 2) atonement was explained almost exclusively in terms of the individual's relationship to God and self, and 3) sermons revealed forgiveness as an atonement term of choice. The findings of this research call for greater clarity in the gospel message today and empower the church to consider what proclaiming atonement to one's neighbor will mean tomorrow.

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All of my work owes itself to my family, a life-long source of faith and formation. Most notably, this project was dependent on the endless partnership, encouragement, and support of my wife, Hannah. Whatever I have accomplished, it is yours as much as mine.

DEDICATION

To my family, Hannah, Rowan, and Kendall

CHAPTER ONE

An Introduction to the Project

Introduction

It has been observed that contemporary Christians have built a “salvation culture” but not a “gospel culture.”¹ The good news is frequently condensed into a message about individual salvation only. Likewise, evangelical culture has come to understand the cross of Jesus almost exclusively within the framework of a legal, or penal, metaphor. The result has been an incomplete gospel message that misses much of the richness and vitality that the Scriptures find in this good news.

Darrell Guder, in *The Continuing Conversion of Church*, sought to reclaim the missionary identity of the church and renew its theology of evangelism. He concludes that its “method must be an expression of its content.”² Lamenting the long historical trend to reduce the gospel message, he points out that “now, at the end of the twentieth century, the church that is to proclaim the gospel appears to have become unsure of itself and incapable of persuasive witness.”³ He suggests that the individualized, privatized gospel that today’s Western church inherited is inept content, which leads to inadequate witness.

¹ Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 28-33.

² Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 27.

³ *Ibid.*, 117.

Dallas Willard pointed out that today's church often makes "Christians," but not "disciples." In *The Great Omission*, he urged for a spiritual life in Christ that was concerned with the whole life and whole person, saying "we cannot have a gospel dealing only with sin. We have to have a gospel that leads to new life in Christ, and then spirituality can be presented as a natural development of such new life."⁴ Seen from various segments of Christian thought, it seems the problem lies at the root.

The content of the gospel is formational for the life of the church. This reality has echoed through the fields of evangelism, ecclesiology, mission, spiritual formation, and more. If the church can speak more fully and fluently about the decisive moment in salvation history, the death of Jesus on a Roman cross, it has much to gain. Yet, this has proven to be no simple task. Just as history has struggled for consensus, debates about the atonement continue today. Theologians have long sought for one theory, a controlling model by which to understand how Jesus' death accomplishes salvation for humanity.

The content for the church's first sermons was found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in the context of Israel's salvation history. Today, the Protestant church continues to place the preaching event at the center of its worship. Preaching is formative as the church invites the word of God to be proclaimed, heard, and lived. Preaching informs and shapes the life and witness of the church. When it does, it remains rooted in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

So, with Paul, "we preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23). As one ecumenical statement affirms, "The starting point of our proclamation is Christ and Christ

⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 64.

crucified.”⁵ Given the myriad of explanations offered in history and the diverse metaphors in Scripture, what words are best to convey this saving power? What concepts or language should preachers employ as they proclaim this good news?

Answers will require engaging the biblical story and its history of interpretation in order to understand the power and mystery of the cross as fully as possible. John Wesley suggested, and perhaps overstated, “Nothing in the Christian system is of greater consequence than the doctrine of atonement.”⁶ Postmodern critiques suggest that this doctrine may require greater clarity, humility, and conviction than ever before. So, this study places preaching and atonement at the forefront. In humility, it seeks a renewed commitment to preaching the “constellational richness” of atonement metaphors.⁷ It also invites preachers to imagine new language for bearing witness to God’s saving work.

Problem Statement

There is a lack of clarity and coherence in language about the cross in evangelical culture. Where clarity is claimed, it is most often marked by reductionism or generalization. There is a need for a renewed understanding of atonement within Christian proclamation. The church needs preaching that includes a rich and robust proclamation of the reconciling work of Christ. Study of how preachers are using their language to communicate the saving work of the cross will help to point a way forward.

⁵ World Council of Churches, *Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation* (Geneva, 1982).

⁶ John Wesley, *A Compendium of Wesley’s Theology*, R. Burtner and R. Chiles, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), 79.

⁷ John McIntyre, *Shape of Soteriology: Studies in the Doctrine of the Death of Christ* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1992), 82.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project was to explore the relationship between the Christian doctrine of atonement and contemporary preaching. This study aimed to provide a greater understanding of current practice and offer proposals for speaking about Jesus' saving work. Preachers and teachers are tasked with communicating the power and purpose of the central event in human history. They seek to articulate "how" and "why" the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ results in a new relationship between God, self, others, and the world. This study sought to understand the current use of atonement metaphors in preaching in order to propose new emphases for future proclamation.

Overview of the Project

Language about the atonement continues to be a topic of significant debate. This project identifies a variety of metaphors employed throughout Scripture and Christian history to explain God's saving work. Churches need to be formed by a holistic understanding of Christian life that is founded on a holistic understanding of God's reconciling acts.

Proclamation of the gospel is vital for the church. Contemporary pastors place importance on the preaching task amongst their roles. Sermon delivery and preparation are given time, attention, and energy in the midst of a host of other duties. Christian preaching is also formative for the life of the church as it invites the congregation to encounter the biblical narrative. Preaching seeks transformation. In pursuit of faithfulness to the biblical text, as well as greater clarity and coherence, this project examined the substance of sermons through qualitative analysis.

A random sample of ten Baptist churches in Texas was taken, and three consecutive sermons from each church from October 2018 provided the content for the study. Qualitative research methods were utilized to analyze the use of atonement language in all thirty sermons, including inductive coding and metaphor analysis.

After surveying the understanding of atonement in Scripture and church tradition, attention was given to the meaning of metaphors and atonement theology in Christian history. The focus of the study was Baptist preachers in Texas, but the significance was not limited to this context. The expectation was that the results would be immediately applicable to preachers in the Protestant tradition. The churches in the sample group provided meaningful parallels to the other ministry contexts, including my own. The samples were also representative of how large populations can be served by the results of the study.

Research Questions

This project uses two research questions to guide the examination of atonement theology in preaching:

Research Question 1: How are atonement metaphors used by contemporary Baptist preachers in Texas to communicate the meaning of Jesus' death?

Research Question 2: What other methods or language are being used by Baptist preachers in Texas to communicate the atonement?

Significance of the Project

Sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow has observed that “Religious communities are awash in words . . . but about their discourse, we [know] virtually

nothing.”⁸ This study sought to fill this gap in knowledge. Marsha Witten’s landmark study of sermon content, published in 1993, revealed that the array of studies which have surveyed church growth and decline, church attendance, or religious belief and attitudes are informative about modern religion. She points out, however, that “these studies have been unable to probe the images, metaphors, and rhetorical formulations that inform belief and behavior.”⁹ This study sought to understand language use, exploring preachers’ various articulations of atonement.

The implications of this study are meaningful for future proclamation of the gospel. The results provided informative findings concerning the content of contemporary sermons, indicated strength and deficiencies, and suggested new content for future proclamation. Empowerment and equipping of faithful gospel preaching were a primary aim of this work. As noted, there is a direct relationship between the doctrine of atonement and the shape of the church. This project sought to serve both the individual and the congregation by shedding light on the variety of images that inform an understanding of the cross.

When the multi-faceted nature of the cross is more evident in the preaching and teaching of the local church, its mission and witness are more vibrant. Parishioners and preachers alike benefit from a broadened understanding of how the death of Christ has been interpreted in history. To an extent, this research informs discussions about God’s nature and character. By allowing atonement to result from rather than inform the

⁸ Robert Wuthnow, “Religious Discourse as Public Rhetoric,” *Communication Research* 15 (1988): 318.

⁹ Marsha Witten, *All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 129.

character of God, this study promotes a healthier understanding of God's nature. Further, understanding the use of metaphorical language helps to determine the limits of language in speaking about God.

Future researchers, church leaders, and congregations can utilize the results of this study as evidence of what is being communicated in today's Baptist churches. It reveals those "formulations that inform belief and behavior." Preaching is a conversation, and its meaning is developed between the proclaimer and the hearer. This begins, however, with examining both what is and is not said. This study added to the field of homiletics by studying what is actually said in contemporary pulpits and what is missing. It offers comparative evidence for assumptions about present Baptist and evangelical teaching. In sum, it equips and empowers faithful articulation of the most important of subjects.

CHAPTER TWO

Biblical and Theological Foundation

Introduction

Historically, the tide of interest in atonement theology has ebbed and flowed, and the volume of material written on the subject has come in waves.¹⁰ The past two decades have offered a large volume of work on the subject. Robert Webber has suggested that “in the Christian faith the key to the puzzle is the work of Jesus Christ. Once we have a solid grasp of the meaning of his work, the rest of the faith falls together around it.”¹¹ While Christian belief has affirmed many things about the work of Christ, no consensus has been reached concerning the “how” question of atonement. Some have claimed to have the key; others have claimed that many keys are needed. Robert Jenson laments that on this account the church has made a “virtue of historical irresolution.”¹² Others celebrate the kaleidoscope of options.

Confusion about the differing views of atonement and how they relate to one another has only compounded in time. Today, it is commonplace to hold tightly to one particular view or to exclude one. Many have misunderstood a theory as the gospel message itself. For the sake of the church’s life and witness, clarification and direction is

¹⁰ Beilby and Eddy, *Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 9.

¹¹ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 39-40.

¹² Robert W. Jenson, “On the Doctrine of Atonement,” in Stephen G. Corocco and Carol G. Carlson, eds., *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 27, no. 2 (New Jersey: Princeton, 2006), 101.

needed lest its preaching become only a “muffled trumpet call.”¹³ As Peter Schmiechen points out, “Without a conscious attempt to sort [atonement theories] out and resolve the tensions between them, they work at cross-purposes and become the underlying cause for conflict on the basic aspects of ministry: worship, preaching, education evangelism, mission, and service.”¹⁴ Here, the biblical witness on atonement will be examined before surveying historic models in Christian tradition.

Defining Atonement

The Christian view of atonement has referred broadly to the saving work of Jesus Christ. Unlike the myriad of theological terms and categories that remain today, atonement does not originate from ancient Latin or Greek languages. The coining of the word “atonement” is attributed to William Tyndale, who used it in his translation of the English Bible. Literally “at-one-ment,” the term dates to 1513. Other sixteenth century uses of this “manufactured word” offer further meaning.¹⁵

Robert S. Paul has shown that the English word atonement, in the manner that Elizabethan era sources first employed the term, referred to “the personal reconciliation of responsible people who had been violently and even mortally opposed to one another.”¹⁶ Paul points to excerpts from Shakespearean plays, *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, and

¹³ Justyn Terry, *The Justifying Judgement of God: A Reassessment of the Place of Judgement in the Saving Work of Christ* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007), 16.

¹⁴ Peter Schmiechen, *Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 354.

¹⁵ Alister McGrath, *Christian Literature: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 744; Jenson, “On the Doctrine of Atonement,” 101; Stephen Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 1.

¹⁶ Robert S. Paul, *The Atonement and the Sacraments* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), 23.

Richard III, as well as Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* to show that Shakespeare and his contemporaries understood atonement as a reconciling act. With this origin, the theological use of the term becomes clearer.¹⁷

This study affirmed the notion that the language of *reconciliation* as the nearest equivalent for what is meant by the term atonement. While many other aspects of atonement are discussed, reconciliation represents the best understanding of how the term was first utilized. Reconciliation itself, however, is a metaphor for the saving work of Christ.¹⁸ Many interpreters agree with this parallel, and some note the apparent synonymous usage by original sources. Take, for example, the King James Version¹⁹ of the English Bible as it renders Romans 5:10-11:

For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son; much more, being reconciled we shall be saved by his life. And not only so, but we also enjoy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.

Three words translated here (reconciled, reconciled, atonement) stem from the same Greek root, *katallasso*. The two English words are used interchangeably. As Richard S. Paul notes, “translators . . . [illustrate] in so marked a way the fact that *to them* atonement meant reconciliation.”²⁰ In his significant contribution to the understanding of

¹⁷ Paul, *The Atonement and the Sacraments*, 20-23.

¹⁸ Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 38.

¹⁹ This translation is the same in both the 1560 and 1611 versions.

²⁰ Paul, *The Atonement and the Sacraments*, 25 (emphasis his).

the atonement in New Testament teaching, Vincent Taylor observes that, “The best New Testament word to describe the purpose of the Atonement is *Reconciliation*.”²¹

The Christian tradition has understood atonement to “signal the work of Jesus Christ that makes possible a reconciled relationship between God and humanity, a relationship previously broken by sin.”²² In its English origin, the term refers to a bringing back together—“at-one-ing”—of a relationship that has been estranged. Theologically, the word atonement refers to the fact that what happens in the death of Jesus reunites God and humanity. The doctrine of atonement has represented “an attempt to say how Jesus’ crucifixion does that.”²³

This discussion of atonement will encompass concepts of the saving power of Jesus as they have arisen from the earliest Christian communities to modern theology. The redemptive work of God cannot exclude his life, death, resurrection, ascension, or eschatological future. Some theories explain the fullness of Jesus’ saving work without need for one or more of these events. This is further evidence of the argument presented here: that no single metaphor can adequately explain the breadth of atonement. As Jesus’ death has become—both in scripture and in tradition—the center of this saving work, the death of Jesus on a Roman cross is the primary concern of the doctrine of atonement. Specifically, it seeks to understand the purpose and significance of his death. Why did Jesus have to die? What does this death accomplish? And here, how ought our language

²¹ Vincent Taylor, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1963), 191 (emphasis his).

²² Beilby and Eddy, “Atonement,” in William A. Dyrness, et al., eds., *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the World-Wide Church* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 84.

²³ Jenson, “On the Doctrine of Atonement,” 100.

give witness to this saving act? Without excluding the events that precede and follow his death, the meaning of the cross will be the central focus here.

Old Testament Roots

Understanding atonement for the sake of contemporary preaching requires an assessment of the Scriptures. Beginning with the biblical text helps to avoid skewing interpretations of passages through the lenses of particular theories. While a full analysis of the Old Testament roots of atonement would exceed the constraints of the present assessment, an overview of several key components of atonement thought in the Old Testament are necessary and worthwhile for considering the intent, themes, and language of the New Testament.

The idea that God was involved in a redemptive work on behalf of humanity is not new in the ministry of Jesus. Integrated into the story of Jesus, and into his own self-consciousness, are several significant themes that emerge from the Old Testament story. These themes heavily influence the context of Jesus' ministry as well as the perception of his earliest followers. The existence of an Old Testament hope "that God would again act salvifically on behalf of his people, even on behalf of the entire world" cannot be ignored.²⁴ Even more so, concepts of holiness, sacrifice, purity, redemption, and suffering were integral to both Jewish history and the Jewish identity.

Holiness

The divine separation between God and his people is evident throughout the Old Testament tradition. The holiness tradition is seen in the instructions for housing God's

²⁴ Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 340.

presence in the Temple, the costs of mishandling the ark of the covenant, and the failure to adhere to God's commands. The need to properly manage the distance between the human and the divine is clear. That which is common is unworthy of that which is set apart. Before the idea of holiness received a strictly spiritual, moral meaning, it was evidenced by the marked boundaries of what is sacred.²⁵

The practice of holiness is also manifested in the purity codes and Temple rituals. It concerns itself with the dangers of sin and the possibility of divine favor. Bernhard Anderson emphasizes that the "priestly tradition was deeply sensitive to the persistence of sin that threatened the holiness (wholeness) of the community."²⁶ The life of the community was centered upon the careful observance of what is profane and what is divine. The intent was that the community of God maintain its covenant faithfulness.

Purity

Far from the most popular portions of the Scriptures, large swaths of Old Testament texts are concerned with purity. These describe in detail how purity is lost and the manner in which it can be regained. While the modern worldview has little understanding of purity and pollution as a basis for social order, the idea that time, space, or matter would be segmented in order to keep things in their proper place is not totally foreign. Concepts of cleanness and uncleanness certainly exist. Consider what does and

²⁵ Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, 7.

²⁶ Bernhard Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 419.

does not touch the floor, how and where food is eaten, and aversion to bodily excrement. More so, time is segmented between family, workplace, home, business, or vacation.²⁷

In a similar manner, the ancient world utilized purity maps to understand the boundaries for living. Purity is of utmost importance, because defilement most certainly would interrupt nearness to God. As David deSilva explains, “Both in the Greco-Roman world and to a much more rigorous extent in the Jewish world, there is the conviction that the person who would be close to God must be pure and whole like God. Defilement and unwholeness separated people from contact with the pure and whole God.”²⁸

Although contemporary readers may find it difficult to identify with these texts, the complex lines of purity are mapped out in the holiness codes of the Old Testament. They are critical to understanding God’s world and helped ancient people to understand where they belonged in it. More so, it was crucial to know when pollution had occurred so that it could be properly dealt with. This ensured access to God and all its associated benefits.²⁹

For today’s readers, this Old Testament theme is quickly dismissed as unnecessary, ritualistic legalism, superseded by later teaching. It should be remembered that “Jewish observance of purity codes was not a matter of externalistic religion but was regarded by practitioners as a meaningful component of living out the covenant God gave to Israel that also included a strong ethical dimension—the pious Jew knew that ‘a clean

²⁷ David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2000), 241-48.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 248.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

heart' was as critical as 'clean hands.'"³⁰ The intersection of Jesus with written and unwritten purity laws is evident in the New Testament gospel accounts.

Jesus contacts unclean people and shares meals in an unclean manner. He reorganizes the purity maps for time in reorienting the Sabbath and redraws purity maps for space as he interprets God's presence.³¹ In addition to Jesus' own life, the further implication of his teaching is that, as Jerome Neyrey notes, "far from separating himself from what is unclean, God repeatedly draws near to Jesus."³² While Jesus' life and teaching might reinterpret aspects of the tradition, God's desire to purify and restore relationships was well known. It is no surprise that this worldview influences earliest atonement thought.

Sacrifice

The use and reuse of sacrificial imagery abounds in the Christian tradition, primarily aided by Paul's writing and the letter to the Hebrews. Many assumptions about the role of sacrifice in the Old Testament have led to hasty interpretations of sacrificial language in the New Testament. Viewed more closely, multiple purposes are represented in Hebrew sacrifice. Take, for example, the use of a burnt offering, intended to produce a

³⁰ deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, & Purity*, 279.

³¹ Jerome H. Neyrey argues that the "basic presentation of Jesus in Mark's gospel is done in terms of purity." Neyrey clearly outlines Jesus' interaction with purity map boundaries in four areas: the map of people, map of the body, map of time, and map of places. On all accounts, Mark shows Jesus reorienting the boundaries from clean/unclean to belief/unbelief in him. See Jerome H. Neyrey, "The Idea of Purity in Mark's Gospel," *Semeia* 35 (1986): 91-128.

³² Neyrey, "The Idea of Purity in Mark's Gospel," 114.

pleasing odor. This “soothing aroma” (NASB), intended to pacify God, is found thirty-nine times in the Pentateuch and three times in Ezekiel.³³

Sacrifice is also utilized as a form of payment, and it is often clear that the sacrifice must be costly in order for it to be effective. Scholars note that the motive for an act of sacrifice is often concerned with provoking the aid of God. Further, the Hebrew term *kippur*, translated and defined as atonement, is particularly accompanied by violent imagery. While the term does not exclusively refer to sacrifice, Stephen Finlan notes that “doing *kipper*, then, means conciliating, placating, wiping clean, or paying off.”³⁴ While payment and aversion are unavoidable aspects of how sacrifices functioned in the Old Testament, they should not imply that they are the only understanding of sacrifice.

In fact, the purpose of sacrifice relates directly to covenantal relationship. This purpose is so evident that Bernhard Anderson can summarize that: “In the Priestly tradition, sacrifice was not understood as a means of appeasing divine wrath or of cajoling God to show favors. Rather . . . [sacrifice is] a means of atonement mediated by priests, of healing a breach in the covenant relationship and reuniting the people in communion with God.”³⁵ Others argue that the servant’s sacrifice in Isaiah 53, for example, is a “restitution offering,” as opposed to a sin offering, purification offering, or guilt offering. In this argument, it is emphasized that the addition of a punitive element is a misunderstanding of the type of sacrifice being offered.³⁶

³³ Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁵ Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 419.

³⁶ John Goldingay, “Old Testament Sacrifice and the Death of Christ,” *Atonement Today* (London: SPCK, 1995), 8-9.

Christian interpretations of atonement often assume that sacrifices were understood as food-payment or that the animal's death was only substitutionary punishment.³⁷ But, for cleansing sacrifices, the corruption is in the Temple (not person) and the blood is the agent for cleansing (not payment). Temple purification was the primary concern of the principal Hebrew sacrifices.³⁸

Redemption

Much like the language of sacrifice and ritual cleansing are carried from the Old Testament into the new, language and vocabulary of redemption are as well. This is to be expected, since God's status as Israel's redeemer was well established. The story of Israel's redemption, with the Exodus at its core, provides a theological context of Jesus' ministry. Walter Brueggeman observes that the Old Testament employs six decisive verbs to tell and celebrate the story of the Exodus (offered here in his translation from Hebrew to English):

1. "Yahweh brings out"
2. "Yahweh brings up"
3. "Yahweh delivers"
4. "Yahweh saves"
5. "Yahweh redeems"
6. "Yahweh ransoms"³⁹

The testimony of Israel's language gives evidence of the rich diversity of meaning found in God's provision of deliverance. Brueggeman adds that "each of these verbs arise from

³⁷ Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, 11.

³⁸ Jacob Milgrom, "The Priestly Laws of Sancta Contamination," in Michael Fishbane and Emanuel Tov, eds., *"Sha'arei Talmon": Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 142-43.

³⁹ Walter Brueggeman, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 174-76.

a different context and range of images, but all agree on their main claim. The verbs witness to a decisive, intrusive act of transformation, whereby Yahweh has interrupted the life of Israel, with its ‘burdens of Egypt’ and ‘slavery to them.’”⁴⁰

It is worth noting again that Hebrew language for God’s deliverance employs a variety of robust terms. Conveying the saving acts of God required an assortment of dynamic verbs. The community did not shy away from seeking out new ways of telling of the power of the exodus narrative. This diversity of theological language continues into the New Testament.

Matthew’s gospel account begins by connecting Jesus’ own life to the exodus. Matthew affirms the words of Hosea 11:1 as he writes: “This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son’” (Matt. 2:15b). The vocabulary of exodus and redemption can be found explicitly in the New Testament. Its presence as an identity-shaping event in the life of Israel influenced those who encountered and interpreted Jesus, the one who “will save his people” (Matthew 1:21).

Christopher Wright suggests that the Exodus event is *the* model of redemption in the Bible. This event reveals the Redeemer God for both the Old and New Testaments. Further, it is one of the keys to the meaning of the cross:

If you had asked a devout Israelite in the Old Testament period “Are you redeemed?” the answer would have been a most definite yes. And if you had asked “How do you know?” you would be taken aside to sit down somewhere while your friend recounted a long and exciting story—the story of the exodus. For indeed it is the exodus that provided the primary model for God’s idea of

⁴⁰ Brueggeman, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 175.

redemption, not just in the Old Testament but even in the New, where it is used as one of the keys to understanding the meaning of the cross of Christ.⁴¹

Together, these Old Testament understandings of God's redemptive activity provide a foundation for later interpretations of his saving act in Jesus. The cross of Christ is indelibly linked to the redemptive work of God in history. His faithfulness to a covenant has been proven, and his concern for the suffering of his people is without question. As will be shown later, Jesus' own interpretation directly connects his impending death with the celebration of the Passover meal, a meal which looks back to the liberation and victory of the exodus. The meaning of the cross of Christ cannot be properly understood if removed from the story of Israel.

Suffering Servant

Few Old Testament texts are as frequently considered in atonement theology as Isaiah 53. The prophet Isaiah confirms that the coming deliverance of God would be brought by means of suffering. The Suffering Servant theme makes significant alteration to the understanding of atonement in the Torah, revealing suffering and substitution as key motifs for the anticipated atonement:

He was despised and rejected by others;
 a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
 and as one from whom others hide their faces
 he was despised, and we held him of no account.
 Surely he has borne our infirmities
 and carried our diseases;
 yet we accounted him stricken,
 struck down by God, and afflicted.
 But he was wounded for our transgressions,
 crushed for our iniquities;

⁴¹ Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 265.

upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed. (Is. 53:3-5)

The witness of Isaiah 40-66 is that God was going to bring a purification that finally and completely dealt with sin and its consequences. The new thing that God was going to do would include Zion, its inhabitants, and most surprisingly, the nations. This purification would at last render sin and its sources ineffective, bringing salvation.⁴²

The Torah never envisions human suffering or death as a way of making atonement, and there is no mention of an atonement that could produce the kind of global and permanent purification suggested by the prophet. J. Alan Groves notes, however, that “such extraordinary purification required an atonement of equally extraordinary and radical nature. . . . It would *not* be by means of the traditional vehicle of atonement—e.g., Levitical sacrifice (Is. 1:11-15). Nor would it be by means of repentance (Is. 6:10) or Israel’s suffering in Babylonian exile. Rather, it would be accomplished by . . . the astounding suffering of one righteous Israelite (Is. 52:13-53:12), who bore the sins of others.”⁴³

The servant song continues in Isaiah 53:11b-12, pointing to the suffering one who would bear the sins of others:

The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;

⁴² J. Alan Grove, “Atonement in Isaiah 53: For He Bore the Sins of Many,” in Charles E. Hill and Frank James III, eds., *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 87-89. (emphasis his)

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Included in the Suffering Servant passage of Isaiah 52-53 is language of ransom, victory, liberation, as well as suffering. McKnight summarizes the thrust of this text as “*a death, understood as a ransom price, leads to the liberation of others.*”⁴⁴ The healing brought by the wounds of God’s servant would set people free from captivity, exile, and oppression.

Discussions of atonement frequently move straight to theories and nuanced attempts to create a logical framework, but the cross is best understood and communicated when it remains within the Bible’s larger story. These concepts directly influence how the New Testament writers interpret the meaning of Jesus’ death. New Testament understanding joins Paul in affirming “that Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the scriptures*” (1 Cor. 15:3, emphasis added). It remains essential to understand that atonement only finds its full meaning when connected to Israel’s story. It is also helpful to keep in view the ways in which Jesus’ atonement fundamentally alters notions from the ancient world. In particular, the scope (encompassing all humankind) and the agent of sacrifice (stemming from God himself) are breaks from Jewish conceptions.⁴⁵ Having made an attempt to broadly understand the context of Israel’s story, the New Testament material must also be considered.

New Testament Witness

⁴⁴ McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 88 (emphasis his), notes that the metaphor of liberation is the application Jesus uses in Mark 10:45.

⁴⁵ Martin Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine of Atonement* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 73-74.

Explanations of Jesus' death often depend on select passages of the New Testament to advance their cause. Many interpret the significance of the cross using Paul's letter to the Romans almost exclusively. Further, contemporary Christians frequently espouse an understanding of atonement that relies on a particular reading of Romans, one that is not unanimously supported by scholarship.⁴⁶ It is important to consider the entire New Testament witness to inform a pursuit of faithful proclamation. This study will give special attention to the synoptic gospels, Pauline writings, and the letter to the Hebrews. There is no better place to begin than with the gospel accounts themselves, and namely, with Jesus' own interpretation of his death.

The Synoptic Gospels

Within the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is recorded several times speaking about his impending death. In the context of first-century Palestine, and in light of the death of John the Baptist, it can be assumed that Jesus anticipated his own death.⁴⁷ His own words affirm that he knew he would die prematurely.⁴⁸ Further, in his reflection upon his impending death, he connects it to God's redemptive work in the life of Israel.⁴⁹ Jesus' predictions about his death should not indicate that he was trying to get killed, but that he knew faithfulness to the will of

⁴⁶ McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 9.

⁴⁷ Joel B. Green, "The Death of Jesus and the Ways of God: Jesus and the Gospels on Messianic Status and Shameful Suffering," *Interpretation* 52 (1998): 24-37.

⁴⁸ Mark 9:31, most notably: "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." See also Luke 13:31-33.

⁴⁹ Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979), 216-19; Christopher Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 553-611.

God may lead him there. Ben Meyer maintains, “Jesus did not aim to be repudiated and killed; he aimed to charge with meaning his being repudiated and killed.”⁵⁰ But what significance did he aim to convey? With what meaning does he intend it to be charged?

A Ransom For Many

Jesus understands that his death is coming, but only rarely does he interpret that death in a context of atonement. The synoptic gospels only include two accounts in which Jesus explicitly locates his coming death within God’s redemptive work: Mark 10:45 (paralleled in Matthew 20:28) and Mark 14:22-25 (paralleled in Matthew 26:26-29 and Luke 22:19-20).⁵¹

Both of these statements are given in a narrative context in which disciples of Jesus are concerned with power and status, and they are both deeply rooted in Old Testament images noted above. Jesus’ statement in Mark 10:45 is frequently considered as the “ransom” saying, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” The Greek word, *lytron*, translated as ransom, is within the same domain as the words salvation and deliverance. The term suggests at least two immediate understandings.

The Roman slave trade included a price for emancipation as a “means of release” (*lytron*). A second understanding is rooted in Israel’s own past, harkening back to the God who ransomed Israel from slavery to the Egyptians. The Septuagint translates God’s promise to redeem Israel using the Greek, *lytroomai*. This language of ransom, it has

⁵⁰ Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, 218.

⁵¹ Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Reclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 55; McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 83.

been shown, is present in the dynamic verbs of Hebrew's Redeemer God and in the work of Isaiah's Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53:11-12). It should be added that unlike the slave trade, God's means of release is "deliverance from" rather than "payment to."⁵²

Passover and Eucharist

Jesus' words at the Passover meal have received even lengthier treatment in atonement studies.⁵³ The Eucharist is rightly understood as a paradigmatic interpretation of his death, and its persistence in the life and worship of the church is unparalleled. As N.T. Wright aptly adds, "When Jesus wanted to explain to his followers what his forthcoming death was all about, he did not give them a theory, a model, a metaphor, or any other such thing; he gave them a meal."⁵⁴ Once again, Jesus places his death in direct connection to Israel's story as he interprets his death in the context of Passover and exodus.

The Gospels are clear that Jesus' death will somehow be *for them*. Mark 14:24 records this: "He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.'"⁵⁵ Matthew's account adds "for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28), bringing into the explanation that relationship to God will be repaired both in an individual and a corporate sense. The language of covenant is also a direct reference to the Old Testament community and represents the establishment of Jesus' new community. This new

⁵² Baker and Green, *Reclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*, 56-59.

⁵⁴ N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion* (New York: Harper One, 2016), 182.

⁵⁵ See also Matthew 26:28: "for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out *for many* for the forgiveness of sins," and Luke 22:20, "This cup that is poured out *for you* is the new covenant in my blood" (emphasis added).

covenant ceremony entails the disciples' identification with and remembrance of Jesus' story. It is an invitation to participate in the benefits of his death by faith.⁵⁶

In addition to themes of ransom, sacrifice, forgiveness, and redemption, the synoptic gospels draw upon concepts of suffering. The prophetic tradition knows well the rejection and suffering, even death, of God's messenger (Neh. 9:26; Jer. 2:30), and second Temple Judaism envisioned a reconciliation that would come about through a great suffering.⁵⁷ It is evident through the gospel witness that "Jesus undoubtedly believed that his sufferings were not due to chance or human violence alone, but were events lying deep in the Providence of God."⁵⁸ It should be noted that no single text or tradition controls Jesus' interpretation of his death or that of the gospel writers. While there is unity in its purpose and efficacy, there is no clearly developed model, and understandings of the concept of atonement remain "amorphous."⁵⁹

Pauline Writings

The cross is a central and key concept in Paul's writing. Despite an enormous amount of attention in the Christian tradition, it is common for the diversity of ways in which he explains the saving power of the cross to be underrepresented. Popular language and interpretation have so emphasized a one-dimensional understanding of Paul's soteriology that his variety of explanations for the meaning of the cross are often

⁵⁶ McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 83-85.

⁵⁷ Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The End of the Ages Has Come: An Early Interpretation of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1985), 5-25.; Baker and Green, *Reclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*, 61-62.

⁵⁸ Taylor, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching*, 13-14.

⁵⁹ Baker and Green, *Reclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*, 62.

minimized. An overview will reveal that he employs multiple images, word groups, and traditions, and that he frequently conflates several in one instance.⁶⁰

A comprehensive look at Paul's thought on atonement is a monumental task on its own. Therefore, analysis of several key texts will be used to explore his thinking. Aggregates of Paul's metaphors for the benefits of the death of Christ and its meaning for the believer can be found in both 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:2 and Galatians 3:10-14.

Mixing Metaphors

In 2 Corinthians 5, reconciliation is the central image. The passage holds that Christ's death is "*for all*." Reading more closely, one will find that a mixture of metaphors is present. Here, Paul presents the death of Christ as a vicarious substitution absent from any notion of punishment. It is also clear that his death is intended to restore humanity's relationship to God. Joel Green summarizes the concepts found as: "*vicarious substitution* ("for us," 2 Cor 5:14, 15), *representation* (2 Cor 5:14, 21) or *interchange*, *sacrifice* (2 Cor 5:21), *justification* (implicitly, 1 Cor 5:19, 12), *forgiveness* (2 Cor 5:19), and *new creation* (2 Cor 5:16-17)."⁶¹

In a similar manner, the Galatians passage provides the interpreter with several images. The benefits of salvation in Galatians 3:10-14 are depicted through: "Christ as the *representative* of Israel in whose death the *covenant* reaches its climax, *justification* (Gal. 3:11); *redemption* (Gal. 3:13); *substitution* ("for us," Gal. 3:13); *sacrifice*

⁶⁰ John T. Carroll and Joel B. Green, *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 113-114; N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 138.; on "conflation of metaphors" see Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, 25-34.

⁶¹ Carroll and Green, *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity*, 125.

(implicitly, Gal. 3:13); the *promise of the Spirit* (Gal. 3:14); and the *triumph over the powers*.⁶² In the case of Galatians 3:13, Paul blends concepts of a Deuteronomistic legal curse and the expulsion of a Levitical curse: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.’” Paul describes a legal problem, a curse against those who break a covenant. He describes the solution in terms that parallel the scapegoat ritual of Leviticus, a reversal of one’s condition by the cursing of something else.⁶³

In these two examples, multifaceted images are brought together. Paul reflects on Christ’s work in relation to Israel. Other examples of Paul’s mixing of metaphors are not difficult to find.⁶⁴ Another example is found in Ephesians 2:15-16, where *recapitulation*, *reconciliation*, and *legal* metaphors are used:

He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

Paul continues in Ephesians 5:2: “and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Here, the words sacrifice and offering are applied to Christ. Lest one attempt to stretch his words too far, note that he will later apply these very metaphors to Corinthian believers (2 Cor. 2:15), to himself in reference

⁶² Carroll and Green, *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity*, 126.

⁶³ Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, 24.

⁶⁴ Ephesians and Colossians will be treated as a part of the Pauline corpus despite the apparent dispute of authorship in scholarship. N.T. Wright advises, “I regard the possibility of significant variation in Paul’s own style as much higher than the possibility that someone else, a companion or co-worker could achieve such a measure of similarity. Other historical examples of that genre do not encourage us to suppose they would have been so successful.” N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 60.

to the Philippians (Phil. 2:17), and to his own death (2 Tim. 4:6). Paul is aware of the deficiencies of the sacrificial system. The logic and rationale of the metaphor are less important than conveying the restoration of fellowship with God.⁶⁵

As in Ephesians 2:15, Colossians 1:20 portrays Christ as the one who brings peace. Here, it is emphasized that “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:19). God is portrayed as the reconciler, bringing peace through his son’s cross. It is “the blood of the cross” by which that peace is made. The same, and much more, is echoed in Colossians 2. Language of forgiveness is coupled with the erasing of “legal demands” (Col. 2:13-14). Following, Paul writes that “He [God] disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it” (Col. 2:15). Here, the meaning of the cross is directly tied to God’s triumph over evil powers, taking as its aim the “rulers and authorities.” The text contains images of victory and is frequently cited in reference to a warfare motif.⁶⁶ These add to the already long list of concepts that Paul draws upon to explain the significance of the cross. It becomes progressively clearer that “the bottom line for Paul is not metaphoric consistency but saving outcome.”⁶⁷ Just as these texts reveal Paul’s diversity, so also his letter to the Romans is crowded with metaphors.

⁶⁵ Taylor, *The Atonement in the New Testament Teaching*, 64-65.

⁶⁶ See Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Atonement*, A.G. Hebert, trans. (London: SPCK, 1931); Greg Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1997).

⁶⁷ Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, 26.

Letter to the Romans

Considering Paul's understanding of salvation would be incomplete without looking to Romans 3:21-26:

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

Interpretations of this passage are varied, but some key observations are helpful. First, the text is centered on language of covenant making (“redemption”) and of covenant keeping (“sacrifice of atonement”).⁶⁸ It has been unclear, however, what Paul intended in his use of *hilasterion*, translated above as “atonement” (NRSV). Literally “mercy seat,” this occurrence is rendered as “propitiation” (NASB, ESV), “sacrifice of atonement” (NIV), and even “expiation” (RSV) elsewhere. Its appearance in Hebrew 9:5 is more typically rendered “mercy-seat.” With only two occurrences, interpreters are left to question what Paul intends by this term, and how scholars have chosen to translate it may indicate their answer to broader theological questions.

In Romans 8:3, Paul writes that “God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.” Strikingly, Paul manages to combine three separate metaphorical concepts in one sentence: sacrifice (Christ as sin offering),

⁶⁸ Carroll and Green, *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity*, 122.

judgment (condemnation of sin), and scapegoat (in the flesh).⁶⁹ He has also shown sin and its consequences as the object of God's condemnation, rather than humans or Jesus.

It has been argued that Paul does not understand Jesus' death to include the idea of retributive punishment. Retribution suggests that he receives a punishment (from the wrath of God) that would have otherwise been inflicted on humankind. This argument holds that taking the legal metaphor in Romans beyond its intention divides God's action from Jesus. Stephen Travis' work on this subject represents a compelling case that Jesus' death bore the consequences of sin, "absorbing the cost," rather than a retributive punishment.⁷⁰ Plenty of scholars are more comfortable including retributive language without assaulting God's character or dividing the Trinity, clarifying that God's righteousness and justice are upheld by so dealing with sin. Still, some insist that Jesus' death "quenches divine anger" by taking the penalty that was due.⁷¹ Others insist that Paul writes of God's anger as leading directly to punishment of sinners.

Study of Romans leads to further questions about the presence of God's wrath. Two-thirds of the New Testament's thirty uses of "wrath" appear in Romans and Revelation. Modern disdain for this concept is partially related to its misrepresentation. McKnight points out that it is not the Bible, but "the way wrath is spoken of by

⁶⁹ Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, 25.

⁷⁰ Stephen Travis, "Christ as the Bearer of Divine Judgement in Paul's Thought," in John Goldingay, ed., *Atonement Today* (London: SPCK, 1995), 21-38.

⁷¹ J.I. Packer, "Anger," in T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 381-383 (384).; see also, Derek Tidball, *The Message of the Cross: Wisdom Unsearchable, Love Indestructible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 184-99.

Christians—mostly preachers, evangelists, and parents” that is alarming.⁷² If it can be properly placed in the context of a united Godhead, understood in terms of God’s “jealous displeasure” at the violation of his love and diminishment of his creation, it can be faithfully employed. Such has been its use by a broad scope of reflective, orthodox theologians. Less helpful treatments seem to portray God as equal parts wrath and love, but God is entirely love.

At last, Paul’s unique contribution to the subject is both deep and wide. Contrary to its popular presentation, his thought is neither uniform nor unintelligible. Indeed, “Paul is not fastidious about the details of the metaphors and types he uses. Christ is not *just* a sacrifice, and his death is not *only* a payment, nor do the word pictures need to preserve every detail of these human institutions.”⁷³ Paul is able to reach into a myriad of social structures and cultural themes to draw out in whatever way possible the profound effect of the cross. I. Howard Marshall summarizes saying, “Paul’s vocabulary expresses the results of Christ’s death rather than its character.”⁷⁴

Letter to the Hebrews

Just as in Paul, the death of Jesus is a central concern in Hebrews. While it is not the only image the writer employs, Jesus is prominently presented as the perfect sacrifice. He is also portrayed as the high priest who offers the sacrifice. In this way, Jesus’ death is understood in Hebrews in terms of covenant. Jesus, himself, is both the mediator of a new

⁷² McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 67.

⁷³ Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, 26. (emphasis his)

⁷⁴ I. H. Marshall, “The Development of the Concept of Redemption in the New Testament,” in *Jesus the Saviour: Studies in New Testament Theology* (London: SPCK, 1990), 250.

covenant and the sacrifice that enables it (Hebrews 9:15). It is noteworthy that each of the passages that emphasize expiation portray Jesus clearly as both sacrificial victim and priest.⁷⁵

Jesus' death is understood as a redemptive act. His death is aimed at the removal of sin, and it is interpreted as a self-sacrifice (Hebrews 9:26). Again, he is known as the one who was offered to "bear the sins of many" (9:28). The language of blood, cleansing, and purification of sins is introduced at the very outset of the text (1:3), and the result of his sacrifice is the establishment of a new, permanent arrangement.⁷⁶

The explicit meaning of the text is that because Jesus is high priest and without sin, the sprinkling of his own blood in the metaphoric sanctuary provides access to the presence of God. His sacrifice has an eternal effect for all people and is to bring about true forgiveness (10:18). What Temple worship could not accomplish, this new high priest can. Further, Hebrews 2:14-15 includes that Jesus' death will "destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death." Jesus is also seen as the "pioneer" (2:10; 12:2) of salvation, the one who goes before and beckons others to follow. Finally, Jesus' suffering and shame are noted as he provides a model for endurance and a hope for the future.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Carroll and Green, *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity*, 134-35.

⁷⁶ Barnabas Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter of Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991), 95.

⁷⁷ Carroll and Green, *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity*, 134-39.

Synthesis

Through an assessment of Old Testament themes and New Testament texts, a diversity of metaphors is evident. The gospel accounts recall the Redeemer God's saving action in the story of Israel, and Jesus interprets his own death in light of the exodus event. Paul, too, employs a full complement of metaphors, often mixing them, to convey the power of the cross. The New Testament writers were convinced of the saving power of the cross and emphasize that this atonement accomplishes a new status in human relationships with God, self, others, and the world. To communicate the breadth and depth of atonement, they draw upon metaphors of sacrifice, ransom, suffering, representation, forgiveness, substitution, new creation, justification, redemption, victory, reconciliation, covenant, and triumph over the powers, to name a few.

It should not be assumed, given the myriad of metaphors, that there is confusion about the effects of the cross. The witness of the Scripture is that a multiplicity of images will be required to adequately proclaim the good news of what God has accomplished in Christ. Questions remain, however, about whether an inherent logic or one overarching concept is perceived. What should be made of so-called theories or attempts to locate a primary image? In view of the research questions at hand, how should contemporary preaching be informed? At this point, an investigation of language and metaphor will be clarifying. Turning to the historical development of atonement theology, it will be argued that this doctrine is, in fact, "an organic whole, one part of which cannot be neglected without serious injury to others, or understood except in relation to the whole."⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Taylor, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching*, 184.

Atonement in Christian History

From the New Testament period to the present, the quest for clarification concerning the death of Jesus is ongoing. Why was the death of Jesus necessary for salvation? How does his death deal with evil, sin, and estrangement from God? The striking diversity of images in Scripture has provided plenty of fodder. Metaphors like sacrifice, monetary exchange, slave trade, healing, warfare, and burnt offering have already been observed. Historically, harmonizing these metaphors has proven challenging. It has been even more challenging to locate one concept capable of answering all of the questions. Looking to Scripture, “the idea turns out to be, in fact, many different ideas.”⁷⁹

It is striking that in the history of the Christian church, there has never been a resolution on the doctrine of atonement. No unified affirmation was offered by early church councils or creeds. The merits of salvation were clarified, consensus was reached on subjects like the nature of Christ and the persons of the Trinity, and formal confessions emerged for these in the Nicene Creed (381) and Chalcedonian Formula (451). Yet, no such belief ever emerged concerning the doctrine of atonement to capture precisely how Jesus’ death accomplishes salvation.⁸⁰

At times, theologians have posited one theory that supersedes, or encompasses, all other concepts, each of which has been developed into a logical framework to answer questions. Some claim to do so comprehensively, but no such theory manages to

⁷⁹ Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, 26.

⁸⁰ McIntyre, *Shape of Soteriology: Studies in the Doctrine of the Death of Christ* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1992), 1-25.

encompass in harmony what all of the metaphors have been able to communicate individually. It remains true that “there was no primary story that answered all the questions posed—either in the first two generations or in the following centuries.”⁸¹ Before examining several models, it will be helpful to consider the use of metaphor in theological language.

Atonement as Metaphor

Historically, explanations of the doctrine of atonement have been categorized differently. Some categorize atonement into theories, finding in one semantic field or another a comprehensive explanation of how Jesus’ death brings about salvation. Seeking a less rigid or systematic approach, it has become more popular to speak of atonement images as the various concepts that provide explanation for the meaning of Jesus’ death. Drawing on the atonement research of various scholars, this study thus far has used these terms almost interchangeably. Recent studies on metaphor, however, reveal it to be the best way to think and speak about atonement.⁸²

A survey of atonement theology must consider all of these categories, but rather than insisting that one theory can adequately communicate the mechanics of atonement or settling for the use of images, it will be shown that metaphor provides the proper context for atonement theology. It will also be argued that various metaphors are needed.

⁸¹ Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 4.

⁸² Colin Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997); Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: WJKP, 2005); See also Hans Boersma, “Atonement, Metaphors, and Models,” *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 99-114.; McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 35-43.

In its Greek origin, the word metaphor combines *meta*, “across,” and *pherein*, “to carry.” Metaphors take words and “carry them across” from one context to another. Sallie McFague explains: “Most simply, a metaphor is seeing one thing *as* something else, pretending ‘this’ is ‘that’ because we do not know how to think or talk about ‘this,’ so we use ‘that’ as a way of saying something about it.”⁸³

Understanding atonement language as metaphorical allows for the realization that, just as each metaphor points to something else, so language about the cross points beyond itself. Some can point to several things, but they are not the ultimate thing. Metaphoric language protects against generalizations that fail to understand the limits of the metaphor. As McFague further points out, “metaphorical statements . . . always contain the whisper, ‘it is *and it is not*.’”⁸⁴ Whether contemporary preaching has affirmed the “*it is not*” remains to be seen. Taking one image or metaphor and forcing it beyond its limits is the worst kind of reductionism and flirts with heretical teaching. Recognition of metaphoric language should promote careful awareness of where metaphors end, which cautions interpreters to work with a hermeneutic of humility. It does not mean that nothing of substance or clarity can be offered.

For evangelicals, especially those of a more conservative nature, this may present a threatening proposition. Conservative Christians are marked by a preference for “literal” meaning. For evangelicals broadly, a more literal reading of Scripture continues to be most popular. Drawing on the work of Colin Gunton, Hans Boersma clarifies that it

⁸³ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 15; Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, 100.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 13. (emphasis his)

is untrue to consider metaphorical language as less real, not providing as adequate a description of reality. On the contrary, metaphors even provide something “extra,” evoking imagination and creativity. God is our shepherd (Psalm 23, John 10:11-18), but not every quality of first-century shepherds (a rough, poor, undesirable class of society) can be assigned to him. Yet, God is “pastoral” in character, and in addition to the characteristics the metaphor intends (loving, carrying, protective, et al.), God as shepherd provides meaning and “atmosphere” that otherwise is uncommunicated.⁸⁵

Metaphors speak of reality—they are not anti-rationalist or non-literal. N.T. Wright adds that “metaphors and stories are in fact more basic within human consciousness than apparently factual speech, and recognizing the essentially storied nature of god-talk is therefore no bar to asserting the reality of its referent.”⁸⁶ It is not as though “mere” metaphors are a hindrance; rather, as Colin Gunton argues, they are “the most appropriate form that a duly humble and listening language should take. In all this, there is a combination of openness and mystery, speech and silence, which makes the clarity and distinctness aimed at by the rationalist tradition positively hostile to the truth.”⁸⁷ Rather than weakening our speech, metaphors empower theologians and preachers in their expression of the truth. Gunton further states: “Thus the tables are turned: metaphor rather than being the Cinderella of cognitive language becomes the most rather than the least appropriate means of expressing the truth.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 99-110.

⁸⁶ N.T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 129-130.

⁸⁷ Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, 37.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

This understanding resists the pursuit of a definitive explication of the atonement's mechanics. The argument is certainly against those who mistake any particular metaphor as the exclusive understanding of atonement. The use of metaphors, however, should not exclude a pursuit for clarity. In the same way that reductionism fails, settling for a long list of metaphors does not provide theological continuity or boundaries for the future. Hans Boersma suggests that groups of metaphors may be gathered under the umbrella of more useful ones. These particularly helpful metaphors, "root metaphors," allow for the creation of "constellations of metaphors."⁸⁹ Root metaphors can serve as atonement models, helping to give a cohesive structure to a group of metaphors and offer a lens through which to understand the atonement. Atonement metaphors become lenses through which the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection can be viewed.

Scholars vary widely in their assessment of atonement models. Conventional thought has tended to propose either one rightful model or three. Treatments vary in how they manage to organize all the metaphors into three groups and which ones they dismiss or subjugate.⁹⁰ Others count several more: Peter Schmiechen's study of atonement offers ten distinctive theories of atonement⁹¹; John McIntyre has identified thirteen.⁹² What

⁸⁹ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 108.

⁹⁰ For example, Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor*, offers three types: the classic view (Christus Victor), the Latin view (satisfaction/transaction), and a subjective view (moral influence), but he ultimately dismisses the latter two in favor of the former. This scheme has been repeated and revised by J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). Colin Gunton, in *The Actuality of Atonement*, organizes metaphors into victory, legal justification, and sacrifice. Willem J. van Asselt settles on four models: the ransom-victory, the sacrificial, the substitution, and the exemplarist representations. Willem J. van Asselt, "Christ's Atonement: A Multi-Dimensional Approach," *CTJ* 38 (2003): 52-67.

⁹¹ Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 11.

⁹² McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*.

metaphors, if any, should be central to Christian thought? Which might be utilized as root metaphors? How might today's preacher organize the available metaphors into useful models?

First, historic Christian thought will be considered in five categories: satisfaction, moral example, ransom-victory, substitution, and recapitulation. Sacrifice will be observed within satisfaction or substitution. Further, additional proposals for organizing atonement will be examined. Last, atonement and Christian proclamation will be considered. Attention will also be given to the effect on the life and witness of the church.

Ransom-Victory

The origin of the ransom metaphor has been seen in the words of Jesus in Mark 10:45. This model has proven to have a “generative function” in church history as it has led to numerous meanings. Ransom theory developed into ideas of Jesus offering up his life, his death as liberation, victory over evil powers, and release for captives. This model also evidenced deeper roots, located in the Exodus liberation, its remembrance in the Passover meal, and the language in Isaiah 53.

Theories in this category primarily understand the cross as a defeat of the “powers and principalities” (Ephesians 6:12). For this reason, language of victory features prominently, sometimes even as the defining characteristic. Jesus' death is aimed at defeating Satan, sin, and evil. Defenders suggest that this was the predominant understanding of the Church Fathers. While nearly all of the them incorporate this theme, they do not do so at the exclusion of other metaphors.⁹³

⁹³ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, in Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 118.

This model is expanded and reclaimed in the work of Gustaf Aulen. In *Christus Victor*,⁹⁴ he considers this the “classic view,” tracing it from the Church Fathers into Luther’s work. He locates atonement within a cosmic drama, a divine struggle in which Christ’s victory triumphs over the evil powers of this world. The problem of sin is identified in the grip of evil on humanity. Aulen understands atonement as God’s work, and he criticizes views that require penance or satisfaction.

Greg Boyd views this model as the “unifying framework” of atonement theology.⁹⁵ He argues that for Paul and first-century Jews, the primary concern “was over how people could get free from the oppressive and destructive force of the cosmic powers that had seized the world.”⁹⁶ Boyd argues that a battle/warfare motif is capable of encompassing all other metaphors, though he seems to redefine the legal aspects of substitution to fit it in.

In response to modern discomfort for substitutionary models, the *Christus Victor* approach has seen a renewal of interest. Richard Mouw voices concern at the growing trend to dismiss substitutionary language in favor of this model. While he acknowledges its contributions, Mouw argues that “*Christus Victor* also runs the risk of downplaying our sinfulness. It is easy to depict ‘enslavement’ to rebellious spiritual powers in terms of victimhood, rather than to acknowledge our own guilt.”⁹⁷ His deeper concern is not that

⁹⁴ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Atonement*, A. G. Hebert, trans. (London: SPCK, 1931).

⁹⁵ Gregory A. Boyd, “Christus Victor View,” in James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, eds., *The Nature of Atonement* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 30.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁹⁷ Richard Mouw, “Getting to the Crux of Calvary,” *Christianity Today* (June 4, 2012), accessed December 1, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/may/getting-to-the-crux-of-calvary.html>.

this view has nothing to offer, but that some contemporary preachers are deliberately using it to avoid any substitutionary metaphor. This, in his estimation, is to overlook the seriousness of sin and the biblical language for how God deals with it.

The twelfth century provided two contrasting perspectives on atonement, both of which have remained dominant themes in atonement discussions. For all of their differences, both begin with a rejection of the ransom theory. These originate from the work of Anselm of Canterbury, a medieval monk, and Peter Abelard, who will be discussed later. For Anselm, God struggling with Satan in this would disparage God's glory and honor; for Abelard, it left the human response out of the picture.

Satisfaction

Many later writers engage Anselm to correct or dismiss, sometimes based on unfair or simplified interpretations. The "Anselmian tradition" has come to encompass an entire category of objective views of atonement, many of which bear little resemblance to his own proposal. It is confusing to treat Anselm's satisfaction theory in connection to sacrifice and penal substitution. Commonality is found in that a transaction is central, but many aspects differ.⁹⁸

These two medieval perspectives are now widely viewed through the lens of Aulen, who categorized them as "objective" (Anselm) and "subjective" (Abelard) views of atonement. The former suggests that the cross aims to accomplish something with God rather than with humans. So-called "subjective theories" are concerned with a change in

⁹⁸ Kevin Vanhoozer, "Atonement," in Kelly M. Kopic and Bruce L. McCormack, eds., *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 175; Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 194-97.

humans and transformation of sinners to repentance. The limitations of this distinction have been shown, and its accuracy is debated, but it does point to two ways that questions about atonement were answered.⁹⁹

As P.T. Forsyth asks, “Where did the difficulty lie that had to be overcome by Redemption? Was it in forgiving the penitent or in producing the penitence that could be forgiven? Was it in God or in man, in the Divine conscience or the human?”¹⁰⁰ For Anselm, the problem that the cross addresses is the restitution of God’s honor and, ultimately, the restoration of creation. He takes seriously God’s role as the upholder of justice. He understands sin as a failure to “render to God his due.”¹⁰¹ Restitution must be made by those who have dishonored God, but sin makes humans incapable of this. God’s justice demands that what was taken away (honor) must be restored. In the end, Anselm’s argument concludes that only God is capable of restoring the honor of God. Therefore, he answers his question, “Why Was God a Man?” by showing that God must become human in order to restore the world. Jesus, the divine Son, freely offers his life to the Father, paying a greater price than the universe. In this way, the death of Jesus satisfies or restores God’s honor.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Aulen, “Atonement,” *Christus Victor*, v-viii; Vanhoozer, “Atonement,” 175; Peter Liethart, “Objectivity and Subjectivity in Atonement” (Oct. 4, 2018), accessed May 5, 2019. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2014/10/objectivity-and-subjectivity-in-atonement/>.

¹⁰⁰ P.T. Forsyth, *The Atonement in Modern Religious Thought: A Theological Symposium*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thomas Whitaker Bible House, 1902), 77.

¹⁰¹ Anselm of Canterbury, *Why God Became Man* in Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, eds., *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (New York: Oxford Press, 1998), 283; Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 194-221; Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 38-41.

¹⁰² Schmiechen, 198-220.

Because of this, Anselm is often associated with other “satisfaction theories,” including those that are penal or sacrificial in nature. These models are much different in substance, and Anselm expressly refuses any notion of punishment. Critics suggest that the transactional nature of Anselm’s satisfaction theory is problematic. These criticisms have only increased in recent decades. Objections claim that giving economic value to Jesus’ death makes God a passive recipient.¹⁰³ For these reasons, some theologians have found his model irredeemable or “unworkable,” citing that it makes God’s acceptance of reconciliation conditional, and thus, contradictory to his nature.¹⁰⁴ More positive interpretations of Anselm describe his theory in terms of debt and honor, implying moral order rather than legal order.¹⁰⁵

Anselm’s theory offers an interesting case study as he articulates atonement for his context, translating the meaning of the cross for his world. He uses terms that coordinate with an honor-and-shame worldview. He characterizes the drama in the vernacular of the feudal system, which raises interesting questions for those who seek to provide a meaningful atonement model for today’s church. Baker and Green also observe that one downfall of Anselm’s model is its failure to critique the culture. While he contextualizes the message, he relies too heavily on the penance system, and he defines

¹⁰³ Objections have further argued that placing intrinsic value on the death of Jesus implies that others should also willingly accept suffering (or abuse). Others view this as divine child abuse. Wherever communication of the gospel allows these objections, it is certainly misrepresented or misunderstood. Yet, critics often draw on distortions of more nuanced versions of this and other theories, rather than acknowledging that God Himself is the incarnate one.

¹⁰⁴ Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), (112)109-112.; J. McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Handsel Press, 1996), 4.

¹⁰⁵ Schmiechen notes these as positive, comparable readings of Anselm’s treatise: John McIntyre, *St. Anselm and His Critics* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1954); George Huntston Williams, *Anselm: Communion and Atonement* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1960); R.W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

God's action primarily from medieval concepts of honor. He also frames forgiveness from the perspective of his culture rather than Scripture. Baker and Green caution that "if we would follow in the path of the New Testament writers, the metaphors we deploy would be at home, but never too comfortable, in our settings."¹⁰⁶

Atonement theories that focus on one particular construct without the inclusion of other biblical metaphors lead to numerous problems. To return to discussions about metaphor, approaches like this fail to show where the metaphor begins and ends. More than Anselm, later interpreters utilized satisfaction theory within the context of the legal system. The payment of honor-debt became the satisfaction of punitive justice. Likewise, notions of wrath became more prevalent. This shift separates Anselm from later penal substitution theories, which will be treated separately. The proposal of Anselm's contemporary, Peter Abelard, will be considered first.

Moral Example

Peter Abelard joined Anselm in refuting the predominant *Christus Victor* model, but he did so quite differently than Anselm, who began with his own question: "Why . . . was it necessary for God to take human nature upon him so that he might redeem us by dying in the flesh?"¹⁰⁷ Abelard asserts that God was free to forgive, citing Jesus' own pronouncement of forgiveness prior to the cross. He sought to undercut the transactional view, arguing that the necessity of Jesus is found in the demonstration of love in his life and death.

¹⁰⁶ Baker and Green, *The Scandal of the Cross*, 141.

¹⁰⁷ Peter Abelard, "Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans," in Robert L. Furr, ed., *Readings in the History of Christian Thought* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1964), 239-43.

Because of the love of God revealed in the cross and resurrection, people are drawn to God in love. So, “our hearts should be enkindled by such a gift of divine grace, and true charity should not now shrink from enduring anything for him . . . So does he bear witness that he came for the express purpose of spreading this true liberty of love amongst men.”¹⁰⁸ Because he retains some images of sacrifice and God’s wondrous love, it is argued that Abelard oversimplified with a label of merely example.¹⁰⁹ Yet, Abelard’s thesis can be summarized saying, “Christ’s death on the cross—persuasive proof of God’s love—inspires us to return that love, on which grounds our sins are forgiven.”¹¹⁰

The subjective nature of this view leads many to dismiss it as a theory—it does not offer a clear answer to the problem of sin. Even if one takes his model to involve more than an example, it is clear that it cannot stand alone as an explanation of atonement. Yet, subjective theories like this one reveal something necessary about atonement, that a human response is a part of renewing one’s relationship with God. If and when atonement is reduced to an “object lesson,” it is no longer a Christian view but a “moral effort alone.”¹¹¹

Pitted against one another, these objective (satisfaction) and subjective (exemplar) views are both revealed as inadequate. Like the biblical metaphors, these theories must

¹⁰⁸Peter Abelard, “Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans,” in William C. Placher and Derek R. Nelson, eds., *Readings in the History of Christianity: From Its Beginnings to the Eve of the Reformation*, vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1988), 151.

¹⁰⁹ Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 291-297.

¹¹⁰ van Asselt, “Christ’s Atonement: A Multi-Dimensional Approach,” 52-67, 62; A. E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Cambridge, 1994), 355.

¹¹¹ Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 252-53.

complement, even interpret, one another to provide a faithful account of the cross. God's action to satisfactorily deal with sin as well as human involvement in this renewal are unavoidable. Both must be accounted for in atonement models. Ultimately, Anselm's perspective won the day, becoming the predominant theory of Roman Catholic theology and greatly influencing theories from the Protestant Reformation such as penal substitution.¹¹²

Substitution

Substitutionary language has already been observed in Anselm. Some mark clear transitions in thought from the early church (believing primarily in terms of victory over evil) to Anselm (satisfaction). Though Anselm's work is ground-breaking in its fully developed logic, language of satisfaction and substitution precede him. Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, Athanasius, Augustine, and others make reference to some form of substitution, whether from a sacrificial or legal perspective. Even so, they do not develop it as the controlling metaphor.¹¹³

Beyond the middle ages, substitutionary language has come to dominate Protestant understandings of atonement. Empowered by the Reformers, Calvin in particular, substitution was wed to legal (penal) language. The fact that most New Testament references to a substitute are now read as direct references to penal substitution reveals the pervasiveness of this model in contemporary evangelical thought.

¹¹² Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought: From Augustine to the Eve of the Reformation*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 158-174; Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 322-30.

¹¹³ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 158-163; See also H. E. W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption: A Study of the Development of Doctrine during the First Five Centuries* (New York: Morehouse-Graham, 1952), 103-13.

Much of the language of substitution is better understood in relation to sacrifice than in the legal, punitive sense. Substitution in Scripture frequently draws from Ancient Israel's system of dealing with sin through sacrifice and scapegoating (e.g., Yom Kippur).¹¹⁴

Kevin Vanhoozer has outlined three significant concerns raised of penal substitution in a postmodern context.¹¹⁵ He speaks first about the challenge of reducing many metaphors into one concept, which subject has been addressed here. Second, he acknowledges the problem of violence and vengeance. Themes of punishment and retribution are harshly criticized topics today, and rightly so. It is an abuse of the metaphor to misrepresent God's nature or character in explaining atonement. At the same time, counter-reactions to a postmodern disregard for substitutionary models has been strong. As an example, the Southern Baptist Convention felt the need to add language of substitution to its 2000 revision of *The Baptist Faith and Message*. Pressing the matter further, resolutions were created and passed at the 2017 SBC annual meeting entitled: "On The Necessity of Penal Substitutionary Atonement." The resolution explicitly affirms, among other things, that penal substitution is "the burning core of the gospel."¹¹⁶ Any reader of the category of theories called penal substitution is left to ask: *Whose* penal substitution? Required acceptance of any one atonement model has never been a characteristic of orthodox Christian belief.

¹¹⁴ McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 111.

¹¹⁵ Kevin Vanhoozer, "The Atonement in Postmodernity: Guilt, Goats and Gifts," in Charles E. Hill and Frank James III, eds., *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 370-73.

¹¹⁶ "On the Necessity of Penal Substitutionary Atonement," Southern Baptist Convention (Phoenix, AZ, 2017), accessed March 1, 2019, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/2278/on-the-necessity-of-penal-substitutionary-atonement>.

Paul Fiddes has argued that while Paul's message includes a penal view of Christ's suffering and understands Christ as a substitute, the combination of the two into a theory of penal substitution is nonexistent. Paul, he argues, does not see atonement achieved from a transfer of penalty.¹¹⁷ I. Howard Marshall, who defends penal substitution, answers similar critics in this way:

It is easy for opponents of penal substitution to present the matter as though it is only because of the cross that God is prepared to abandon his wrath and forgive sinners. Certainly, this is a frequent criticism of the doctrine. Yet I am not aware that any responsible defenders of the doctrine would take this point of view, and if there were, I would side with their critics.¹¹⁸

It remains true that atonement debates are frequently fueled by caricatures as sources, rather than engaging with responsible defenders. Numerous examples of overstretching this metaphor, however, can be found in both academic and non-academic sources. While various defenders use this metaphor carefully and constructively, it is the most frequently abused metaphor in popular usage today.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, understanding more nuanced, faithful treatments helps recover the most useful elements.

Vanhoozer addresses this second critique by moving emphasis from legal transaction (an "economy of exchange") to a focus on the "excess" love of God. Baker and Green, strong critics of penal substitution, observe that Vanhoozer's articulation of a penal substitutionary atonement "is not simply a postmodern move but rather an attempt

¹¹⁷ Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989).

¹¹⁸ I. Howard Marshall, *Aspects of the Atonement: Cross and Resurrection in the Reconciling God and Humanity* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2001), 54.

¹¹⁹ Mark D. Baker, *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 28-29.

to root atonement theology in Israel's story rather than in medieval society or a Western courtroom. Israel's story, and Jesus' story within that story, leads Vanhoozer to multiple metaphors and multiple layers of meaning."¹²⁰ All expressions of substitutionary atonement would do well to imitate this emphasis. Substitutionary atonement's most responsible defenders help to pull it alongside, rather than apart from, the other metaphors. Responsible preachers must be expected to do the same.

This is addressed in the third postmodern critique that Vanhoozer observes: the challenge of responsibly preaching and practicing an atonement linked to divine retribution. He concludes that "those who wish to commend the doctrine of atonement to postmoderns must henceforth demonstrate how it leads to healthy rather than abusive practices."¹²¹ He further suggests that "the postmodern critique requires us to develop a nonreductive doctrine of atonement that perceives the saving significance of Jesus' death in terms other than this-worldly economies of exchange."¹²²

Stephen Travis has convincingly shown that while language of penal substitution is present in Paul's writings, it is not the most fundamental idea. Travis concludes in "Christ as Bearer of Divine Judgment in Paul's Thought About the Atonement":

I have argued that Paul's understanding of the death of Christ does not include the idea that he bore the retributive punishment for our sins which otherwise would have to be inflicted on us. To understand the atonement in those terms is to misunderstand what Paul means by "the wrath of God." It is to press too far the implications of his legal metaphor. It is to risk driving a wedge between the action of God and that of Jesus [...]

¹²⁰ Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 188-89.

¹²¹ Vanhoozer, "The Atonement in Postmodernity," 373.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 401.

Rather than saying that in his death Christ experienced retributive punishment on behalf of humanity, Paul says that he entered into and bore on our behalf the destructive consequences of sin. Standing where we stand, he bore the consequences of our alienation from God. In so doing he absorbed and exhausted them, so that they should not fall on us. It is both true and important to say that he “was judged in our place”—that he experienced divine judgment on sin in the sense that he endured the God-ordained consequences of human sinfulness. But this is not the same as to say that he bore our punishment.¹²³

Those who emphasize “judgment,” “reward,” and “punishment” as the vernacular of salvation should heed Travis’s strong warning that “we should be cautious about assuming that divine judgment works by the same criteria and with the same intention as human courts; and we should define retribution carefully rather than loosely.”¹²⁴

Other careful articulations of substitution, such as Christopher Marshall’s, present a helpful alternative by adjusting the central language:

It is true . . . that Paul sees *substitutionary dimension* to Christ’s death. But it is substitutionary not in the sense of one person *replacing* another, like substitutes on a football team, but in the sense of one person *representing* all others, who are thereby made present in the person and experience of their representative. Christ died not so much instead of sinners as on behalf of sinners, as their corporate representative.¹²⁵

In fact, many scholars have opted to replace substitution with the language of representation, considered next as a part of recapitulation. These wish to retain the meaning of substitution without the baggage it might bring along.

Another perspective within the category of substitutionary atonement has avoided punishment and retribution altogether. In the early 1600s, Hugo Grotius proposed a view

¹²³ Stephen Travis, “Christ as Bearer of Divine Judgment in Paul’s Thought About the Atonement,” in *Atonement Today* (London: SPCK, 1995), 37.

¹²⁴ Stephen Travis, *Christ and the Judgment of God: The Limits of Divine Retribution in New Testament Thought* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2008), 9.

¹²⁵ Christopher Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 61. (emphasis his)

of atonement that maintained God's righteousness and the necessity of his moral government of the universe. In this governmental theory, Jesus suffers the consequences of sin, not punishment. His substitutionary sacrifice upholds God's moral government. God's nature remains rooted in love. He makes atonement by providing the grounds for forgiveness in his demonstration of justice. Some theories are able to pull various metaphors together, functioning as a controlling metaphor rather than an exclusive theory. The model of recapitulation accomplishes this.¹²⁶

Recapitulation

Originating in the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons and further advocated by Athanasius, recapitulation manages to incorporate other traditional views. Literally, it means "sums up" or "brings to a head." This draws from the language of Ephesians 1:9-10, "He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ" (NASB). The model teaches that Jesus recapitulated Adam's life, Israel's life, and all humanity's lives. The Son of God redoes Israel's history. In Adam, mankind was led into captivity to the enemy. In Christ, obedience to the purposes of God is realized.

N.T. Wright develops this explanation of atonement using the language of "reconstitution."¹²⁷ Jesus reconstitutes Israel and all humankind by overcoming the failure of the first Adam, of Israel, and of humanity. His messianic role has served to

¹²⁶ Millard J. Erikson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1983), 720-23.

¹²⁷ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 169.

wholly undo the wrongs committed by Adam and Israel.¹²⁸ Irenaeus describes that Christ “in His work of recapitulation, summed up all things . . . in order that, as our species went down to death through a vanquished man, so we may ascend to life again through a victorious one.”¹²⁹ Irenaeus further explains the significance of the cross saying, he “became what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”¹³⁰ Unlike other theories in history, this language brings together various metaphors into an organizing principle—a root metaphor—which offers a way of holding together several models. For this reason, it receives further consideration alongside several others.

Unifying Atonement

Several authors take on the task of presenting a unified perspective of atonement, proposing an overarching scheme to hold together the various metaphors. Unlike others, these recent works do not assert that one model should prevail exclusively; rather, they seek to harmonize all the metaphors under the umbrella of one particular model.¹³¹

Noted already, Hans Boersma’s contribution in *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* fits this category. Building upon the recapitulation framework, he writes:

One of the most intriguing elements of Irenaeus’s atonement theology is his ability to combine the various atonement models by means of his understanding of recapitulation . . . As the representative of Israel and Adam, Christ instructs us and models for us the love of God (moral influence) . . . Christ suffers God’s judgment on evil and bears the suffering of the curse of the Law (penal

¹²⁸ Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 39.

¹²⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *The Writings of Irenaeus*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1869), 111.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹³¹ Vanhoozer, “Atonement,” 199-202.

[substitution]) . . . Christ fights the powers of evil, expels demons, withstands satanic temptation to the point of death, and rises victorious from the grave (*Christus Victor*).¹³²

Boersma frames discussion of the atonement around the “hospitality” of God. It is reminiscent of Miroslav Volf’s emphasis on “embrace.”¹³³ Boersma explains the violence of the cross as a necessary reality within fallen creation, which awaits a yet-unfulfilled, pure hospitality. The cross is necessary to preserve God’s purpose for creation, not for retribution. As the quote above indicates, he uses this theory as a unifying concept.

Second, other authors unify atonement metaphors in a Trinitarian model. As Robert Sherman suggests, “One can understand adequately neither Christ’s reconciliation . . . nor that reconciliation’s fundamental unity as God’s gracious act apart from the Trinity.”¹³⁴ Trinitarian theology is assumed by all orthodox theologians of history, yet Sherman points uniquely to the Trinity as a unifying atonement model. Specifically, he uses the three offices of Christ (prophet, priest, king) to correspond to Aulen’s classic categories for atonement. Adam J. Johnson has taken a similar approach, drawing on Aquinas and Barth, to reveal a Trinitarian shape to atonement.¹³⁵

Additionally, Alan Spence offers Christ’s “mediatorial work” as the unifying idea.¹³⁶ He argues that alienation from God was overcome as “the Son became as we are

¹³² Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 112-13.

¹³³ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

¹³⁴ Robert Sherman, *King, Priest, and Prophet: A Trinitarian Theology of Atonement* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 9.

¹³⁵ Adam J. Johnson, *Atonement: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

¹³⁶ Vanhoozer, “Atonement,” 200.

so that he might, on our behalf, make peace with God.”¹³⁷ He argues that Christ’s mediatorial role best explains how God fulfills his covenant promise, achieving God’s overarching purpose of making peace. These differ slightly from the proposal in Joel Green’s “kaleidoscopic view.”¹³⁸ Green holds the many over the one, not giving primacy to any. Schmiechen, too, argues for all of the theories together with no controlling metaphor.¹³⁹

Having surveyed a myriad of biblical and historical perspectives, it is important to conclude with clarification—the church must have something to say. Advocating for the usage of multiple metaphors should not result in confusion. Several affirmations are appropriate, even if they are not an exhaustive representation. In his comprehensive study, Peter Schmiechen concludes that three common threads can be found in each atonement theory. These three affirmations are at the heart of Christian views of the saving power in Jesus Christ:

1. His opposition to sin, death, and moral evil

Jesus’ life, cross, and resurrection mean a judgment of God against the world. . . . The tension between God’s goodness and the sin of the world reaches its culmination in Jesus’ rejection and death. The resolution is revealed in God’s vindication of the crucified at Easter, but awaits its complete manifestation in the final revealing of God’s glory.

2. His fidelity to the rule of God on earth

Jesus actualizes the new being for humanity and the world according to God’s purposes. In his faithfulness to God, Jesus represents the true humanity . . . It is God’s will in Jesus Christ to give life in the face of sin and death. It is precisely at

¹³⁷ Alan Spence, “A Unified Theory of the Atonement,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6 (2004): 420.

¹³⁸ Green, “Kaleidoscopic View,” in *The Nature of Atonement: Four Views*.

¹³⁹ Schmiechen, *Saving Power*.

this point that Jesus' suffering and death enter the story as the consequences of his holiness and faithfulness.

3. His participation in our life

The final affirmation has to do with Jesus' participation in our life. The gospels make clear . . . that Jesus was one of us, identified with us, and took part in our life. . . . he chose to be for us by being with us.¹⁴⁰

Preaching Atonement

The biblical material and postmodern critiques of atonement theories cause varied responses, including leading some to preach the cross with rarity. This may be an unintentional shift in light of increasingly therapeutic messages, but for others, it is deliberate. This response is considered a failure on the part of Christian worship and proclamation because the cross and resurrection are the foundation of the church. As John Stott has reminded the world, "it is safe to say, no Christianity without the cross. If the cross is not central to our religion, ours is not the religion of Jesus."¹⁴¹

A second response is seen in those who herald one model in exclusion of others, which has proven problematic since the richness of the event requires an equally rich proclamation. The reductionism of single-theory preaching forfeits the "constellational richness" in the metaphors.¹⁴² This is not to suggest that every metaphor must emerge in every sermon—some may evidence only a few; many may utilize only one. A church's collective teaching, however, should not be monochromatic. The life of a congregation

¹⁴⁰ Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 345-352. All content is directly quoted, however, numbered headings (in italics) have been taken from Schmiechen's own summation for clarification.

¹⁴¹ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 71.

¹⁴² McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, 82.

ought to be formed by a diversity of images. The totality of its teaching ought to provide all of the lenses through which to “survey the wondrous cross.”¹⁴³

Further, preachers and teachers ought to grapple with the culture and context of their neighbors, seeking out new means of illuminating the good news. P.T. Forsyth suggests, “The Church must always adjust its compass at the Cross. But in so returning it does not simply retrace the steps or tread the ground of those who have gone before.”¹⁴⁴ The canon of metaphors must remain open, and the church must seek out new language and innovative ways to herald the good news. These, of course, should be measured by their congruency with the biblical witness and their coherence with other models and metaphors.¹⁴⁵

Avoiding the pitfalls of reductionism and confusion is important for two reasons. First, the narrative power of the cross exceeds the metaphors. Leslie Newbigin points out that “the Christian story provides us with such a set of lenses, not something for us to look at, but for us to look through.”¹⁴⁶ Far too many preachers have rewritten the Christian story using only the vernacular of one metaphor. Others have cast aside meaningful lenses that, for centuries, have shaped and formed Christian understanding worldwide. Alternatively, the Christian story invites the hearer—and the herald—to use all available metaphors to discover “what is the breadth and length and height and depth”

¹⁴³ Isaac Watts, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.”

¹⁴⁴ P.T. Forsyth, in Frederic Louis Godet, ed., *The Atonement in Modern Religious Thought: A Theological Symposium*, 3rd ed. (London: James Clarke, 1907), 52-53.

¹⁴⁵ McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, 85.

¹⁴⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 15, 38.

of the love of Christ (Eph. 3:18). Congregations need to hear the fullest account of the story so that it can transform the way they see the God, others, themselves, and the world.

Second, atonement theories are formative for the life and witness the church. Schmiechen has shown that the “what” and “how” of Christ’s saving work directly influence forms of church. Interpretations of the meaning and significance of the cross correspond to aspects of a congregation’s life and work. As McKnight argues, atonement is embodied; it is praxis. The atoning work of God necessitates the formation of a community. How the saving work of God is understood will directly correspond to what believers are formed for, saved into, and called to do.¹⁴⁷

Conclusion

Scripture provides a diversity of concepts through which to understand God’s saving work in history. The cross of Jesus Christ cannot be rightly understood apart from God’s redemptive history. As the evidence has confirmed, “atonement theology cannot help but reflect those multiple portraits. Consequently, Scripture itself, together with the theological tradition, incorporates, authenticates, and invites the coexistence of multiple, irreducible models of the atonement.”¹⁴⁸

It has been argued that all attempts to understand the cross do so by use of metaphor. As Vincent Taylor puts it, “The atonement can be elucidated by human analogies, but ultimately it can be compared with nothing else; in the last resort it is *sui*

¹⁴⁷ Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 353-65; McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 117-56.

¹⁴⁸ Joel B. Green, “Christus Victor View: Kaleidoscopic Response,” in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, 65.

generis.”¹⁴⁹ The evidence from Scripture and tradition shows that no single metaphor is capable of adequately conveying the meaning of the cross. The consequences of sin are multidimensional, and so is the redemptive work of God. What is discovered is “a host of necessary, fitting and mutually complementary theories of Christ’s saving work which are founded in scripture and developed throughout the history of the church.”¹⁵⁰

This means that Christian preaching must place numerous metaphors before the church to faithfully proclaim the power of the cross. To use only one metaphor is to fail to “stand in silence before it, acknowledge its wonder, and submit to its power.”¹⁵¹

Preaching and atonement are formative for the life and witness of the church, so to preach as though the cross were reducible to one theory is problematic. To faithfully embody the saving power of cross, the people of God must continue to mine the rich resources provided in Scripture and tradition.

¹⁴⁹ Taylor, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching*, 190.

¹⁵⁰ Adam J. Johnson, *Atonement: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 6.

¹⁵¹ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 340.

CHAPTER THREE

Method

Introduction

Several studies offer valuable insight for ministry through sermon content analysis, and they illustrate a need that this study addresses. In 1991, Joseph Faulkner offered an expansive analysis of sermon content in Disciples of Christ churches. His examination of 206 randomly selected sermons concluded that “there is little detailed and searching analysis of the pictures of Christ in these sermons.”¹ He reveals that references to Christ “are more often passing references than extended treatments . . . Familiar theological concepts—like Christ’s Sacrifice on the Cross and his victory over death—are mentioned but their theological import is left unexplored.”² More than twenty-five years later, one is left to wonder if this is also the case for the Baptist context?

Marsha Witten’s *All is Forgiven*,³ published in 1993, explores the influence of secular culture in Protestant preaching and represents a significant work in understanding the actual content of Baptist sermons. She analyzed forty-seven sermons on Luke 15:11-32, twenty-one Southern Baptist and twenty-six Presbyterian (U.S.A.). Among her conclusions, she notes that “the transcendent, majestic, awesome God of Luther and

¹ Joseph E. Faulkner, “What Are They Saying? A Content Analysis of 206 Sermons Preached in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) during 1988,” in D. Newell Williams, ed., *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples’ Relation to American Culture, 1880-1889* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 416-39; 427.

² *Ibid.*, 427-28.

³ Marsha Witten, *All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Calvin . . . has undergone a softening of demeanor throughout the American experience of Protestantism” and that sermons reveal that “God’s qualities have been mellowed in contemporary context.”⁴ Some explanations for this phenomenon have been considered here. Even more striking, Witten concluded that “conversion is portrayed far less as the need to grapple with sin-nature than as a reorientation of one’s psychology.”⁵

Therapeutic messages replaced any real theological discourse.

Similar studies utilize qualitative research for sermon analysis to study how symbolic discourse shapes organizations.⁶ Others have applied qualitative sermon research to understand how preachers deal with specific content, such as poverty in the South African context.⁷ D. M. Haskell’s 2008 research offered a similar study of contemporary sermons in Canada, studying Easter sermons for references to pop culture.⁸ These confirm both the validity of this data source and the effectiveness of the method, as well as its usefulness for future ministry.

⁴ Witten, *All Is Forgiven*, 53.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁶ Stephanie Zimmerman, Joy Hart Seibert, et al., “‘God’s Line Is Never Busy’: An Analysis of Symbolic Discourse in Two Southern Appalachian Denominations,” *Sociological Analysis* 31, no. 3 (1990): 287-306.

⁷ H. J. C Pieterse, “An Open Coding Analytical Model of Sermons on Poverty With Matthew 25:31-46 as Sermon Text,” *Acta Theologica* 31, no. 1 (2011): 95-112.

⁸ David M. Haskell, et al., “Defending the Faith: Reaction to The Da Vinci Code, The Jesus Papers, The Gospel of Judas and other pop culture discourses in Easter Sunday sermons,” *Review of Religious Research* 50, no. 2 (Dec 2008): 139-56.

Goals of the Study

It has been shown that clarification concerning the doctrine of the atonement is necessary and valuable for the church, and preaching is an influential component of a church's formation. Existing research, seen in Faulkner, Witten, and others, only increases concerns about the content of contemporary preaching. For these reasons, this study focused on the presence of atonement language in sermon content, and in particular to study the atonement metaphors and language of contemporary Baptist sermons.

Research Questions

This study utilized two research questions to explore the nature of atonement theology in preaching:

Research Question 1: How are atonement metaphors used by contemporary Baptist preachers in Texas to communicate the meaning of Jesus' death?

Research Question 2: What other methods or language are being used by Baptist preachers in Texas to communicate the atonement?

Research Methodology

The methodology for this research included selecting a population for study, choosing a fitting sample method, data collection, and qualitative metaphor analysis.

Population

The population of study was sermon content from weekly worship services in Baptist churches in Texas. To locate the study denominationally and for clarity in reporting, the population was narrowed to those churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention that are located in the state of Texas. This included churches that

cooperate with various state and local conventions, which allowed for a defined population and helped maintain feasibility.

Sample

For substantive and practical reasons, only larger churches were sampled. Witten cites Robert Wuthnow to defend the usefulness of speech from influential contexts. Self-reported Southern Baptist church data was narrowed to a list of churches in Texas that report 1,000 people or more in weekly worship attendance. Each of these churches was ascribed a random number through a number generator that produced ten numbers, each corresponding to a church, and these ten churches became the sample group.

Denominationally, the sample yielded eight churches that cooperate within the Baptist General Convention of Texas (Texas Baptists), three that identify with the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention (SBTC), and one that relates to both of these state denominational entities. Three of the churches in the sample were historically African-American churches.

Three consecutive sermons, each delivered on the first three Sundays of October 2018, were acquired from each of the ten sample churches, and these thirty sermons comprised the study sample. Using multiple sermons per church increased the data for each church and allowed for further conclusions about individual churches in relation to one another.

Data Sources and Collection

The data sources for this study were recordings of sermons from video sources that were also transcribed into text. Some studies of this nature have chosen unique

Sundays in the church calendar (e.g., Easter, Christmas, first of the year). Because the study aimed to understand what the average parishioner actually hears each week, three consecutive Sunday sermons were chosen from each church. Sermons preached on the first three Sundays of October 2018 were chosen to better represent content from an average weekly service. The sermons were all from a weekly, corporate worship service on Sunday mornings.

Once the sample churches and sermons were collected, each sample church was assigned a number and each sermon was assigned a letter: A, B, or C. Thus, sermons were identified in this study based on their sample church number and sermon group letter (e.g., sermon 1A or 3B).

The sermons in the sample averaged 35.5 minutes in length, providing more than 1,000 minutes (1,064) in sermon content, or about eighteen hours. Several sermons set the longest length at forty-two minutes and the shortest was twenty-six minutes. Rough transcripts of sermons averaged over 5,500 words each, netting more than 175,000 words in total.

Because the goal was to assess content (not preachers or churches), identifying information was removed, which reduced the likelihood of bias in coding and categorization. Primary scripture texts were noted in the analysis occasionally, but all biographical information was retained for validity.

Data Analysis and Reporting

This study utilized qualitative research methods to analyze the data source. Text analysis focused on the presence of language about atonement and explored the function of metaphors related to the topic. Procedures and interpretation methods outlined by

Rudolf Schmitt, which build upon the conceptual analysis and cognitive linguistics of Lakoff and Johnson, were used for qualitative metaphor analysis.⁹ Schmitt calls for the selection of a target topic, identified here as atonement.

All sermons were viewed and searched word-for-word multiple times for the existence of content codes related to the topic, which were identified and categorized inductively, and repetition of metaphors and semantic fields was noted. The final stage included specific attention to summary findings that emerged from evaluating all thirty sermons. A summary of the data and findings is presented in Chapter Four with further significance and implications of the findings discussed in Chapter Five.

⁹ Rudolf Schmitt, "Systematic Metaphor Analysis as a Method for Qualitative Research," *The Qualitative Report* 10, no. 2 (2005): 358-94.

CHAPTER FOUR

Summary and Findings

The purpose of this project was to explore the relationship between the Christian doctrine of atonement and contemporary preaching. More narrowly, it examined the presence of atonement theology within Baptist sermons in Texas. Through qualitative analysis of each sermon in the random sample of thirty, the results revealed in what way and to what extent language was used by preachers to communicate the atonement.

Of all, four sermons showed no substantial evidence of atonement theology, explanation of Jesus' death, or elaboration on the significance of the cross. The other twenty-six sermons provided content that contributed in some way to the findings of the study. Statistically, this means that 86.67% of the sermons sampled made implicit or explicit use of atonement language or metaphors. Qualitative research methods further revealed several primary and secondary findings corresponding to the research questions.

Primary Findings

Research Question 1 asked: "How are atonement metaphors used by contemporary Baptist preachers in Texas to communicate the meaning of Jesus' death?" Guided by this research question, a thorough content analysis resulted in several primary findings.

Primary Finding One: Sermons exhibited a diversity of metaphors and language concerning the atonement.

The evidence provided by thorough coding and categorization revealed that the sample group collectively exhibited a broad range of atonement metaphors. This suggests

that sermon content within the population also contains a varied range of metaphors by which preachers speak about the atonement. For example, language from legal, penal, sacrificial, substitutionary, ritual cleansing, Eucharist, Passover, and ransom metaphors were all present in the sample.

While no individual sermon or sermon group contained all of these, it was uncommon to find single sermons that remained committed exclusively to one metaphor. Rather, the individual sermons continually showed evidence of drawing from a diversity of metaphors and semantic fields to both explicitly and implicitly allude to the meaning and significance of Jesus' death. The codes represented in the results revealed that various ways of speaking about the doctrine of atonement were present within the sample as a whole.

Sermon 6B offered the strongest example of ceremonial sacrifice and Passover metaphors, managing in one sermon to include several unique Old Testament themes as well as sacrificial categories:

Jesus was the one to whom all of those ceremonial laws pointed. So, you and I are no longer bound. . . . So why don't we keep the festival of the Passover? Why? Jesus is the Passover lamb, and the book of Hebrews says again and again this little word once and for all: Jesus was the Passover lamb. He has fulfilled the ceremonial law . . .

So, Jesus says in John 5:46, "You like Moses? Yeah, Moses wrote about me." Jesus fulfilled those predictive prophecies. Jesus not only did that, but he fulfilled all the laws of the Old Testament. So, he fulfilled the law of sacrifice by dying in our place. That's why you and I don't bring animals with us to church to sacrifice them on an altar. And I don't believe we ever will again, because Jesus is the once and for all sacrifice for our sins. Look at Hebrews 9:12 where he just points that out so powerfully, that not with the blood of goats and lambs do we come but with the precious blood, the perfect blood of God's only son. Jesus brought his own blood to the altar of the cross.

Other sermons also contained content related to the same metaphors. In Sermon 8C, the Old Testament sacrificial system was drawn upon to add:

Then God began to deal with a nation with a people, and he chose the nation of Israel. And he said this: “I want you through the tabernacle system. I want you to sacrifice animals. And as you sacrifice animals, those animals will represent the fact that without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin.” And there the scarlet thread continued. And then after David bought the land and Solomon built the temple, the temple system was enacted in once again. Hundreds and millions of animals in the past were sacrificed, because it was going to point to one great ultimate sacrifice: the person of Jesus.

This sermon directly recounts the story of Jesus in connection to Israel’s story, specifically linking Jesus’ sacrifice to the Old Testament sacrificial system. This sermon immediately continued, adding:

And you may recall one day, Jesus is on the shore of the Jordan and his cousin John the Baptist points at him. He says, “Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” And don’t you understand that Jesus then took his arms, and he spread them out on a cross, and he was nailed there on Calvary’s tree, and he had a crown of thorns and he had piercings in his hands and his feet. He had a spear raved into his side and the scarlet thread was made complete.

I’m just curious, how many of you have experienced the redemption that comes through Jesus Christ today? And don’t you understand? There’s only one name by which people are saved.

Further content within the sacrificial metaphor is found when Sermon 5C noted that Revelation finds Jesus as “the lamb crucified, the lion of Judah. [John] sees Jesus the lamb. He sees a lamb slain in the midst of the whole deal.” Sermon 4A adds, “There is a sacrifice involved . . . Salvation is the most costly thing in the world. It costs God everything.”

Legal and penal language was present in multiple sermons. Sermon 1B also used a legal metaphor, reminding the congregation:

I will be constantly having to remind myself that it’s not about me. That’s where the hope comes from and you’re right. You have been judged. You have been

judged. God picked up the wooden mallet and he banged it and he said, “Order!” He said, “Get away. She’s mine. He’s mine.”

In similar way, Sermon 1C added explicitly penal language to the legal theme, proclaiming:

We were far from God and hostile in our mind. So, we deserve judgment. We deserve it from a righteous God. We deserve judgment, but God in his great love for you and mercy toward us instead of giving us judgment that we deserved, he sent his own son, Jesus Christ, to the planet and Jesus Christ came as the image of God to demonstrate, to reveal God, but then to go to a cross and on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin and mine.

Sermon 5C explains the cross in similar language saying, “He [Jesus] comes to show what man is like. He comes to show what God is like. And so he comes and he lives and he dies on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin.” Sermon 2C strongly emphasized punitive and substitutionary metaphors:

We deserve wrath and punishment from God . . . Jesus Christ left heaven and came to Earth. He was punished in our place. The wrath that should have been poured out upon us was poured out upon Jesus Christ for all of our sin, past, present, and future. And when we drink the cup of salvation, when we through faith come to acknowledge Jesus as our Lord and Savior, when we give our lives to Jesus, the result is eternal life in the renewal of a right relationship with the God of the universe. This is what Jesus Christ has done for us because he is the Savior. Jesus of Nazareth in the Savior. Do you know him?

Cleansing and washing metaphors were seen in sermon 1C in stating, “Without the shedding of blood, there cannot be any remission or cleansing of sin. . . . He became dirty so you can be clean.” Sermon group 4 was also marked by references to Christians as “blood-washed believers.” In part, this is driven by the conviction that, as Sermon 4C stated, no matter how great the amount of sin “there would have been enough of the blood of Christ to wash every sin away.” Sermon 5C also noted, in several moments, that Jesus’ death “cleanses my life.”

Christ as Victor is found in several sermons. Most clearly, Sermon 8A depicted Jesus as the victor over death and other powers:

Jesus is going to beat death and everything you are going through this morning. Everything you and I have went through this week, Jesus has already been there. He descended into the depths of the earth to fight the enemy. He died on the cross for all of our sins and our scars and our screw ups and our secrets. All of our struggles, all of our confusion, all the areas of imbalance in our life. He took all those things on himself and they took him off the cross and places him in a tomb and he beat death. . . . He's alive this morning and with one breath you can have his life living on the inside of it.

While not as prevalent, Eucharistic metaphors were noted in this portion of Sermon 2C as it explained, "When Jesus talks about taking and drinking the cup, here's what you need to realize: Jesus Christ drank the cup of wrath so that we could drink the cup of salvation." Sermon 3B connected the Lord's Supper specifically to substitutionary atonement after quoting John 3:16: "This is nothing more or less than the doctrine of substitutionary atonement and this has a lot to do with the Lord's Supper because in the Lord's supper we remember the Lord is our substitute."

Further examples of substitutionary language were present as well. Sermon 2B explained Jesus' death as having been "in our place," and Sermon 2C further stated that "Jesus left heaven and came to Earth. He was punished in our place. The wrath that should have been poured out upon us was poured out upon Jesus Christ for all of our sin: past, present, and future." Sermon 4C concluded by acknowledging Jesus for "taking my place." Likewise, Sermon 6B understood the sacrifice of Christ as having been "in our place" and the righteousness of Jesus imputed to believers.

Only Sermon 5C alluded to a recapitulation theory of atonement, suggesting that a New Adam is found as Jesus is "raised from the dead to start a whole new race." In addition to evidence for the metaphors above, language of ransom, payment, and

redemption had a significant presence in the sample. Further evidence for this and specific sermons are noted in Primary Finding Two.

Primary Finding Two: Ransom and redemption metaphors appeared most often in sermons.

While no metaphor was chosen exclusively by preachers, the sermon samples revealed that language of ransom and redemption was most prevalent among metaphors for atonement. Throughout the content of sermons in this sample, metaphors of slavery, chains, and freedom were all frequent choices by preachers. These are most frequently connected to larger clusters of terms within ransom or redemption motifs. Additionally, language of purchase and payment built on the ransom-redemption preference.

When considering sermon groups (the ten churches represented in the sample of thirty sermons), the frequency of these motifs became clear. Every one of the ten sample churches provided evidence of a ransom or redemption metaphor. Language indicating that Jesus paid a price or rescues from bondage was found in at least one sermon from each of the sample churches. In most cases, multiple sermons from a given church used language supporting these metaphors.

Sermon 1C showed that Jesus “went to the cross to purchase your salvation, to redeem you, to reconcile you back to God.” It then further added to the freedom metaphor in suggesting, “You may be saying . . . he can never break my chains of addition or my chains of pornography or my chains of depression or my chains of whatever. The thing is: it’s holding you back.” After relating atonement to the story of the Israel’s escaping slavery in Egypt, Sermon 2A wondered, “Maybe you’ve gotten used to the predictability of slavery rather than actually fighting for your freedom. Just think

about your sin . . . [God says] I am waiting to send you into your freedom, but you are comfortable and content in slavery.” Sermon 2C solidified this metaphor further, adding:

Jesus of Nazareth has all the power you need to break any and every chain in your life. Whatever is making you feel hopeless, whatever you feel chained to right now, whatever sin struggle is going on in your life, Jesus Christ gives you hope for a better day. He is our way to freedom and here’s what I love for some of you: for a few of you, this is going to sink in and you’re going to believe. You’re going to begin to believe this about Jesus Christ: that he can be your way to freedom. Some of you, in the next few weeks, in the coming months, you’re going to begin to sing a new song of freedom because Jesus Christ has been your way to it.

Sermon 4A considered Jesus’ death asking, “How much is someone willing to pay? Jesus was willing to pay his all to redeem you and me.” Sermon 3A favored this metaphor as well in stating that “the plan of redemption is crystal clear . . . Before the foundation of the earth, the Most High God, Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, determine to bring glory to themselves by redeeming a group of people known as the church out of bondage to sin.”

Sermon 6C took, as its primary theme, a metaphor of Jesus rescuing people from the jail cell of sin. The sermon envisioned people as being held at ransom by the enemy. The preacher described that “Jesus doesn’t come and he doesn’t gently knock on the door. He steps in and puts C4 on the wall and he blows a hole into and he says, ‘Come out!’ You see the cross is not a timid thing. . . . See, Jesus frees us from the jail cell of sin.”

Sermon 6C further described the scenario saying, “He has freed you. He’s freed. You do not have to live under the tyranny of sin and death any longer. Leave the jail cell. Step into the light so that it can be seen that what has been done in you in done through God.” In the segment of Sermon 8A offered above, Jesus was depicted as defeating the

enemy of death as “he descended into the depths of the earth to fight the enemy.” Sermon 9A acknowledges the payment Jesus makes to remove a debt:

No, regardless of how good we think we are . . . No matter how holy, spiritual, we think we are. We all owed a debt that we could not repay . . . But thank God that Jesus paid the price for our debt with his precious blood. And because he paid the price, we can have another chance.

Though more punitive in nature, Sermon 10C also described a payment: “He is on the cross. They’ve crucified him. He is dying, paying for their sins. And of all the things that Jesus would say, Jesus says, ‘Father, forgive them.’”

Multiple allusions to the sins and challenges of the present life that hold believers captive contributed to the strong presence of ransom and redemption metaphors. It is noteworthy that while ransom themes were frequent, there was no clear consensus on how this worked. For example, sermons differed as to what was causing the slavery/captivity and to whom a payment or purchase was directed. The most common uses identified sin as the problem/evil to which humans are enslaved. The atonement delivers Christians from felt-needs, but the resolution is rarely identified as a problem to be resolved in God’s nature. Very seldom was it made clear the payment is given or directed to Satan or the evil one for the release.

While sacrificial and substitutionary metaphors were present, examples within sermons were not noted as frequently. Further, while instances of recounting God’s work of atonement as punitive or within a satisfaction motif existed, these metaphors were not as freely utilized within other portions of sermons. Ransom, freedom, and victory language seemed to be more readily used by preachers within the context of varied sermon topics and texts. These sermons did not negate or ignore other biblical metaphors;

rather, they seemed to be able to connect a liberating message of atonement with sermon content more often.

Primary Finding Three: Penal language, though present, was rarely connected to explicit retributive justice.

While the frequency of usage was not as high as the ransom-victory metaphor, language of punishment, penalty, and wrath in relation to the death of Jesus was explicitly found in seven of the thirty sample sermons. These seven sermons came from five (half) of the churches represented in the sample group. Statistically, this means that 23.33% of all the sermons in the sample, and 50 % of the churches sampled, contained sermon content with penal language. It was not clear, however, that all of the penal language used in the sermons understood the cross in terms of punishment. Even more, God was hardly attributed as the actor surrounding penal language.

Among the eight sermons noted here, only three, Sermons 1B, 2C, and 6C, directly linked God to the wrath or punishment which is carried out. Sermon 1B maintained that “if we got what we deserve it would be the wrath of God.” Sermon 2B claimed that “we deserve wrath and punishment from God . . . and He [Jesus] was punished in our place. The wrath that should have been poured out upon us was poured out upon Jesus Christ for all of our sin.” Sermon 6C, despite utilizing a ransom-victory metaphor throughout the entirety of the sermon, added that “if you are in Christ, the punishment for your sin has been paid.”

Several sermons that exhibited penal language did so without explicitly tying that penalty to God. In other words, it was unclear whether the sermon was suggesting that Jesus satisfied God’s penalty. It remains possible that these sermons envisioned the cross

as absorbing the consequences of sin (penalty), rather than taking a punishment from God that otherwise would have been ours. While God is not fully removed from that scenario, this distance is characteristic of atonement metaphors that are uncomfortable emphasizing wrath, punishment, and violence as a means of achieving justice. To be clear, the sermons in general were replete with the fact that sin has disrupted the relationship between man and God and that sin must be dealt. Yet, that God required violent retribution, much less that the cross is retributive, were few and far between.

Sermon 1C, which also utilized payment language within a ransom metaphor, stated that Jesus death on the cross was “to pay the penalty.” Sermon 3A maintained that Jesus’ death frees humankind from the penalty of sin. Likewise, the penal language in Sermon 5C and Sermon 6B only referred to the cross as payment for a penalty. Surrounding evidence from these sermons showed no implications of God carrying out that penalty as retributive justice.

Primary Finding Four: Atonement language and metaphors were frequently conflated incoherently.

So far, the presence of a variety of biblical metaphors has been noted positively. Chapter 2 argued in favor of a multidimensional approach over and against the promotion of single-metaphor theories of atonement. Sermons in the sample, however, were not always able to utilize multiple metaphors in a coherent manner. In fact, where sermons sought to bring clarity to the atonement or to elaborate further, they often added confusion to the topic by mixing metaphors in unintelligible ways.

Some sermons moved from one metaphor to the next, expanding one’s understanding of God’s saving work. Numerous examples were found, however, in which

metaphors were combined in a single sentence in ways that, when analyzed, were not sensible. The sample sermons showed evidence that including various metaphors is only helpful insofar as it is done with clarity.

Some sermon groups such as those in Sermon Group 1 were found to do this repeatedly, showing evidence in all three samples. Sermon 1C exemplified this kind of muddled language in saying, “He shed his blood to pay the penalty for your sin so that you could be clean.” The listener may find it difficult to understand what is meant when the stated result of a paid penalty is cleanliness. While any metaphor invites an eventual break from how something actually is, making illogical explanations by combining words or phrases from varied explanations of the cross can become counterproductive.

A similar kind of confusion was found in Sermon 1B. In an attempt to paint a legal picture, the preacher departed suddenly with logic that did not fit the courtroom metaphor: “You have been judged. God picked up the wooden mallet and he banged it and he said, ‘Order!’ He said, ‘Get away. She’s mine. He’s mine.’” Other sermon segments were even less clear as the sermon showed little continuity with the problem addressed, purpose of redemption, or goal of creation. Consider this from Sermon 1B:

We do not deserve to be made right with God. God is perfect. Jesus came. He lived a perfect life. He knew no sin. We sin, and we turned from God, and we shunned God, and we think that we have it all figured out, and we have this wicked heart, and we go our own way. Then, we need repentance, and we need this change of direction in our life so we can have full life. Or, if not, we’re going to lead to death. But either you choose that or you don’t. It’s all by faith because of the grace of God and the mercy that he has on your life. It’s not about what we deserve to have. If we got what we deserved, it would be the wrath of God. God has grace for you, His grace for us today.

In other instances, even in the same sermon, the language was much more clear: “He became guilty so that you can be made innocent. He became one under judgment so

that you can be free from judgement.” Again, atonement was succinctly addressed saying, “Why did the King of Glory die? To reconcile you to God and what an amazing thing that he would love you like that.” These segments exhibit much more clarity and coherence. To the contrary, Sermon 5C showed examples of confusing mixing of metaphors. Cleansing sacrifice became mixed with legal metaphors, seeing God as one who “cleanses my life and declares me ‘not guilty,’ declares me ‘justified,’ declares me clean and holy.” A more careful use of these metaphors would allow them to support one another, to illustrate the same reality from multiple angles.

Secondary Findings

Secondary findings were organized based on themes and trends noted in qualitative analysis. Research Question 2 asked, “What other methods or language are being used by Baptist preachers in Texas to communicate the atonement?” Methods or codes not acknowledged in the primary findings were considered within secondary findings. Several commonalities emerged as key findings from within the sample and were organized in order of significance.

Secondary Finding One: Sermons frequently interpreted the atonement through other biblical texts.

When it comes to explaining the meaning of atonement and how God has brought about reconciliation, preachers frequently looked within the biblical text for illustrations. Rather than expounding a single theory or using systematic teaching, preachers repeatedly used stories from within the Christian scriptures to communicate atonement and salvation. For example, several sermons used the experience of people in biblical

stories to show what salvation is like. Preachers were able to explain the saving work of God today by pointing to events within various genres of biblical material.

For example, in a sermon that centered on Romans 5 as the key text, Sermon 1B utilized a recounting of the story of Esther and Mordecai as illustrative of God's initiative in salvation. In a sermon centered on expanding one's view of Jesus, Sermon 2C spent considerable time offering a litany of where the saving work of Jesus can be seen in each Old Testament book. Sermon 3A used Jesus' words about the challenge of the rich entering the kingdom of God and the need to become like a child to elaborate how salvation is received. Sermon 8A suggested that like David in Psalm 16, Jesus would not see decay and neither would those who believe in him.

Sermon 2A correlated the experience of the Israelites in the Exodus narrative with the contemporary Christian to frame atonement within a slavery-freedom motif:

They see their enemy chasing them down and they don't think, "God saved us before. He'll save us again." No, they're very thought is, "I give up. I give in. This is too hard. Just take us back to Egypt. I'd rather be enslaved than live in fear, if this is what freedom means." . . . But if we're honest, too frequently this is our exact response. We act this way all the time.

Sermon 9B also used Israel's experience to understand salvation. This sermon related the plagues of Egypt and God's provision to the struggles of contemporary believers and the deliverance of God:

Before God takes you on a journey, God established his faith and trust in Him. God will not put you on a journey without having some faith and having some trust in Him. When God delivered the children of Israel from Egypt one Monday before he took them to the Red Sea, God had to establish faith and trust in Him. Now watch this: They knew about the God of Abraham. They knew about the God of Isaac, and they knew about the God of Jacob. . . . So when you don't really know God, God has to take you through some stuff so you can get to know the God you that you serve. . . . So, God had to do some things in their lives in order to build faith and trust in him. You see the thing that you are going do in your life.

It might just be that God is building your faith and trust in Him. We're just like the children of Israel.

In a similar way, Sermon 5C used the experience of Isaiah 6, a dramatic scene in which a seraph brings cleansing and atonement by touching a live coal to the prophet's lips. Drawing on that text to explain the atoning work of Jesus, Sermon 5C proclaimed:

It's Jesus who came from the heavenly realm to us to die on a cross without asking your permission. And while you were yet sinners, he came and died on the cross. He took coals from the altar where his own body had been sacrificed and brought them and not only cleansed your lips but cleansed your life and transformed you into a real human for the first time since the garden of Eden. . . . The glory that fills the temple, the glory that fills the earth, the glory that anticipates my needs, brings the benefit and cleanses my life and declares me not guilty. Declares me justified. Declares me holy and clean. What's my response to that? Well, in the moment that Isaiah realized that he was forgiven and cleansed and justified, he heard a voice. You typically do.

Some examples of using Old Testament stories to illustrate the doctrine of atonement were implicit, but some were explicit. Sermon 1A made the connection explicitly in saying, "By faith, Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness and they laid hold of their hope that was in God by trusting God. Now listen, if that's how they did it in the Old Testament, then that's how you do it today." Sermon 9A utilized the woman washing Jesus' feet to frame discussions about salvation and David's Psalm 51 to make analogy to the human need for salvation.

This tendency reveals that when seeking to better understand the doctrine of atonement, preachers frequently use scripture to interpret other scriptures. The saving effects of the cross are understood through the lens of other biblical texts. In some examples, these other texts were specifically about God's saving work or covenant faithfulness, but at times, these instances seemed to stretch the beyond the original

meaning of the text to make an illustration. In sum, when looking to further illustrate the atoning work of Christ, preachers regularly turned to the biblical narrative itself.

Secondary Finding Two: Atonement was explained almost exclusively in terms of the individual's relationship to God and self, neglecting others and creation.

Reconciliation, as it was expressed in the sermon samples, was almost exclusively about making right one's relationship with God. Not surprisingly, the sermons communicated atonement metaphors in ways strongly influenced by individualism. While some sermons took on topics like hope, balance, or enemy love, the saving work of the cross was not clearly connected to the community it creates. All of the language about sin, payment, cleansing, redemption, remaking, and recreating described the restoring of one's relationship with God. These sermons were aimed at a future hope; there was little evidence that the atonement affects present reality nor that it constitutes a new community.

Sermon 5C represented an exception in its ability to link atonement to incorporation into the body of Christ. That sermon claimed:

That's what you do when you see glory. It's what you do when you've been forgiven. You just present your bodies as a living sacrifice and then you're a part of the body. Don't misunderstand who you are. Now you're a member of the body, and you're gifted individually by the grace of God. So, you may not be a prominent part of the body. You may not be the mouth, or you may not be the nose or the ear. You may be a little finger. You could be a thumbnail. You may be a toenail. . . . But here's the deal. You're a part of the body of Christ and inside of you there is this resurrected power, the same spirit that raised Jesus from the dead.

The only other noteworthy examples in which sermons used atonement theology with consideration of a community or communal identity came from instances in which salvation was framed in the experience of the Israelites. In other words, sermons only incidentally linked atonement with any sort of ecclesial role.

Even when talking about the atonement in broader language, such as the peace that it accomplishes, sermons managed to make it about the singular “you.” Having quoted the proclamation of Colossians 1:20, that God chose to “reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross,” Sermon 2B went on to emphasize the personal nature of the text saying, “You see that? Now he’s talking about *you* . . . He wants you to know him and walk with him.”

In the same way, God’s goal for all of creation was rarely mentioned in connection with atonement. Instead, the “self” was prevalently favored in sermons. It was clear that salvation can improve the individual’s life, address felt needs, and enhance the quality of one’s future. For the most part, however, it was not clear whether atonement entails a restoration to others or the world.

Secondary Finding Three: Sermons revealed forgiveness as an atonement term of choice.

Throughout all of the sample sermons, the word “atonement” was used only once. The word “reconcile” was found nineteen times in various forms. The word “forgive” appeared ninety-six times in its various forms (forgiveness, forgiven, forgive). This data is indicative of the strong preference for the use of forgiveness language to describe the atonement. Many of these uses pertained to content about the Christian requirement to forgive, even that it is rooted in the manner in which God has forgiven.

In this context, to be forgiven is synonymous with being reconciled or being atoned for. Rather than use those words, preachers chose repeatedly to speak about the God who forgives or the forgiveness one receives. While it does not offer a theological explanation, forgiveness does speak to the reality of atonement.

As Sermon 1A showed, “in Christ we find hope to be right with God. In Christ, we find hope to be forgiven of our sin and Christ. We find hope to live a different life. In Christ we find hope of heaven.” Sermon 3A recalled “the day you were saved” as “the day when the Lord opened your eyes and you ask him to forgive your sin.” Sermon 5C used forgiveness to talk about the atoning moment, “when you know you’ve been forgiven, you begin hearing God. He was speaking the whole time.”

The language of forgiveness was both a more common term and a more common human experience than some of the other language about a restored relationship with God. From this data, the preference for speaking about forgiveness of sin suggests not only that this has been prevalent in the broader evangelical tradition but that it remains a relevant term today for communication of God’s saving work. This field of terms is also indicative of the broader theme of sin as the primary problem of atonement. In all, forgiveness speaks both to the human state and to the character of God.

Conclusion

This research centered on the relationship between the doctrine of atonement and contemporary sermons. Through data collection, careful analysis, and summary findings, this project achieved its stated goal. It studied atonement language in Baptist preaching in Texas to lead preachers toward greater understanding and better communication.

The primary and secondary findings of this study identified in what ways and to what extent atonement metaphors were used in Baptist sermons sampled. The summary findings contribute to a greater understanding of the population. These results allow for a critique of current practices and suggest proposals for future proclamation. Further

discussion in Chapter Five will shed additional light on the practical implications, theological significance of this study, and its usefulness for preachers and teachers.

CHAPTER FIVE

Evaluation and Significance

Summary of Findings

The findings of this project revealed several significant characteristics about the contemporary Baptist sermons in Texas and further contributed to understanding how the atonement is communicated in the modern worship context. The collection of three sermons from ten random churches resulted in a sermon sample group of thirty sermons. With the doctrine of atonement identified as a focus topic, qualitative analysis and open coding allowed for themes and significant findings to emerge. This study was guided by two research questions:

1. How are atonement metaphors used by contemporary Baptist preachers in Texas to communicate the meaning of Jesus' death?
2. What other methods or language are being used by Baptist preachers in Texas to communicate the atonement?

The sermon content collected confirmed that the doctrine of atonement is readily found in most sermons. Use of specific atonement metaphors, theological assumptions, and explanations of God's saving work were frequent. Analysis of metaphors utilized by sermons revealed that a variety of images were used to communicate the atonement. In all, the saving significance of Jesus' death was not limited to or even dominated by one metaphor. Rather, analysis showed that the sample exhibited strong diversity in language about the atonement. Although a diversity of metaphors was witnessed, a tendency to conflate metaphors in a confusing manner was noted. Sermons did not always combine metaphors in coherent ways, creating illogical sentences or explanations of Jesus' death.

While other metaphors were present, ransom and redemption terminology outnumbered other atonement themes. Language of freedom, victory, chains, and purchase all contributed to the presence of ransom and redemption motifs. Further, language of Jesus' death as punishment or penalty only rarely entailed a retributive justice initiated by God. Penalty and punishment were more clearly connected to the consequences of sin.

Secondary findings recorded in the study also noted that sermons frequently communicated the atonement by referencing other biblical texts. Old Testament narrative and gospel accounts became illustrative of the saving work of God. Bible characters and events aided in elaborating on how salvation is transmitted or received. The study also found atonement theology to be aimed at resolving a problem within the self or with God, but rarely was atonement connected to the creation of a new community. Terminology of forgiveness was also found to be a preferred semantic field for speaking about atonement and reconciliation.

Theological Significance

The nature of this research project lends itself to extended theological consideration. The project is centered on the formative power that words have in the life of a congregation. Understanding that theological convictions shape a church community, this study sought to better understand the words that inform belief and behavior. It sought to investigate what is and is not said about the central event in human history during evangelical worship.

Historical and biblical theology were explored at length in Chapter Two, creating a firm foundation from which to interpret atonement theology in contemporary sermons.

It has been noted that consensus concerning the doctrine of atonement has been historically elusive. While the saving effects of the cross of Jesus have long been at the core of Christian belief, explanations of how the cross accomplishes salvation have never been uniform or universally codified. It is incumbent upon preachers and teachers to mine the biblical text and faithfully articulate the saving significance of the cross. This shared theological task can benefit from this study and continued reflection on its content and findings.

Within the primary findings, it was noted that language of ransom and redemption were favored in sermon content. Theologically, sermons seemed most interested in conveying that the cross is able to free people from the things in life that enslave them. At times, sermons used careful theological language to describe this, while other times, preachers seemed to suggest that the cross was aimed at relieving our felt needs. Sermon segments bordered on therapeutic ideas, meant to improve one's quality of life. The ability of ransom language to be used in this therapeutic way could indicate why some sermons manifested more examples of this metaphor.

Between Reductionism and Confusion

In his assessment of twentieth century British atonement theology, Justyn Terry considered both contemporary preaching and significant texts on atonement. He noted that atonement theology struggled between two poles of an oversimplified single-theory on the one hand and multiple-image mess on the other. His findings explain:

We have found that contemporary sermons and introductory courses to the Christian faith generally offer either one modest insight into the atonement or a puzzling array of images through which the work of Christ might be understood, with the result that there is either a lack of breadth or of clarity about what this good news actually is. Each in their different way provides no more than a

muffled trumpet call which is unlikely to rouse people to make ready to meet their God.¹

Like Terry's assessment, this study has observed the danger at both poles. In Chapter 2, it was argued that the New Testament uses an array of images to explain the atonement. It was also shown that single-theory approaches forfeit the constellational richness of the gospel. The findings of this study have further shown that there remains a danger in creating a "puzzling array." Some examples were found in which various metaphors were not combined in a coherent manner, adding confusion rather than lucidity. Both poles are cause for concern.

The theological significance of this study rests on its ability to enhance and empower faithful proclamation of Christ's saving work. Better understanding of the state of contemporary preaching will help future preachers to avoid these pitfalls. The poles of reductionism and confusion are pervasive in atonement teaching, and they hinder the effective communication of Christ's saving work. As Terry further notes, "the tendency is either to make the doctrine unrealistically transparent or impenetrably opaque."²

Vincent Taylor's assertion regarding atonement in the New Testament continues to ring true, that the atonement is "an organic whole, one part of which cannot be neglected without serious injury to others, or understood except in relation to the whole."³ This study has shown, however, that careful consideration must be given to how each part will relate to the whole. Sermon content and teaching can become muddled if

¹ Justyn Terry, *The Justifying Judgement of God: A Reassessment of the Place of Judgement in the Saving Work of Christ* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007), 16.

² *Ibid.*, 44.

³ Taylor, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching*, 184.

atonement metaphors are not employed in an understandable manner, clearly showing what they intend to convey and how that meaning connects with the broader significance of the cross.

Postmodern critique of atonement theories has only heightened the need to carefully consider language. As was observed in Chapter Two, “the postmodern critique requires us to develop a nonreductive doctrine of atonement that perceives the saving significance of Jesus’ death in terms other than this-worldly economies of exchange.”⁴ This study of sermons from within influential contexts contributes to the ongoing development of the doctrine of atonement. It has allowed for the study of sermon content that provides examples for emulation and revision of current practices.

Between Critique and Contextualization

In Chapter Two, it was further observed that some historic atonement theories are marked by the culture from which they emerge, and some even exhibited a failure to adequately subvert the world around them. It was also suggested that the church ought to seek out new ways of shining a light on the good news, and that these must emerge from within the context of its neighbors. These two realities offer a second set of poles within which today’s minister must operate—a need to allow the gospel to critique one’s world on the one hand, and the need for continual contextualization of the atonement on the other.

Mark Baker and Joel Green wrote in their own conclusions about communicating the atonement today:

⁴ Vanhoozer, “The Atonement in Postmodernity: Guilt, Goats and Gifts,” 401.

How best to articulate the saving significance of the cross? Our first answer is that we must take seriously the social environments in which we seek to faithfully live and communicate. Our first answer is that we would take seriously the delicate balance to be maintained between articulating with and over against that environment so that our forms of communication would be shaped within but not wholly determined by that environment.⁵

The worship of the church ought to be carefully aimed between the poles of “articulating with” and speaking “over against” its context. This project points the church toward atonement teaching that carefully considers its need both to critique and to contextualize.

It is here that the theological significance of this project intersects with its implications for future ministry. The body of Christ needs to embrace this theological task so that it can remain a vibrant and effective witness to the work of God. As Baker and Green add:

Communities of believers everywhere are charged with the task of grappling with the biblical witness and the theological tradition and with the thought forms and deeply held values of the people next door, so as to address their world with the good news—that is, with a message that is and can be heard and embraced as good news.⁶

This project grappled with the larger conversation of atonement theology as well as its practical application in today’s sermons. This encouraged and contributed to the ongoing work of the church of addressing its world.

Implications for Ministry

Atonement thought is formative for church life, and the topics of atonement and proclamation provide immediate implications for ministry. The reality of Christian culture today was depicted in the introduction to Chapter One, suggesting that today’s

⁵ Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 256.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 261.

church struggles to make disciples because it has embraced a “salvation culture” rather than a “gospel culture.” This points toward practices that might improve the condition of the local church. It has sought to provide preachers, teachers, and leaders with a greater awareness of atonement theology and how it shapes the life and witness of the church. By improving one’s understanding of the content of the gospel, a more confident and competent proclamation can be formed.

Given the findings in Chapter Four and the foundation provided in Chapter Two, preachers can speak confidently within various atonement metaphors. Those who have otherwise been limited by familiarity with single-metaphor theories will find that sermons in Baptist churches have been able to draw from the rich diversity of the Bible’s language. This study empowers preachers to speak from multiple perspectives, understanding the cross in a kaleidoscopic view.

Those who have been confused by the “puzzling array” of images will find clarity, specifically in explanations found in Chapter Two. Chapter Four has shown that confusion is not a unique problem and that careful use of language can help to avoid this pitfall found in contemporary sermons. This study leads preachers and teachers to speak between reductionism and confusion, between critique and contextualization.

In the ministry of the researcher, this study challenged assumptions and provided a more informed perspective in two primary areas. The first was in clear comprehension of historical theology concerning atonement. A large amount of literature continues to be published on the topic of atonement, and debates span the spectrum from scholarly to nonacademic discussions. To consider the topic thoughtfully or engage the discussion

constructively, it is imperative to clearly define theological terms and accurately describe various atonement theories.

It was challenging to sift through atonement literature to ensure that fair consideration was given to the most responsible defenders of various ideas or positions. Rather than comment on caricatures or point out the weakest arguments, this study forced me to become familiar with the more charitable interpretations of each atonement metaphor. While this does not leave my analysis and conclusions free from critique, the process itself provide numerous helpful insights and less negativity concerning multiple metaphors for atonement.

Second, this study was informative about what is actually preached in the context of the population studied. Published literature may comment on atonement preaching anecdotally or provide personal experience, but little evidence is available concerning what is taught today. Rather than address assumptions or critique what is assumed to be true about atonement language in contemporary sermons, this study brought answers that can inform more constructive work. While the answers it offered were both positive and negative, and encouraging and discouraging, the data and findings are a relevant contribution to the subject. The population of study also closely parallels my ministry context, opening the door for further application and considerations in future proclamation.

Possibilities for Future Research

This study's population was limited to Baptist churches in Texas, which population was further limited in scope to churches that affiliate with the Southern Baptist Convention or the state conventions that cooperate with it in some way (SBTC

and BGCT). Future research might focus on or include other Baptist groups or fellowships in the region. Similar studies can also be carried out beyond this geographic limitation, allowing for the results to speak to an even broader context. Research of a different scope or in other contexts may validate the findings or offer unique findings for comparison.

This study was carried out within consideration of the largest churches in the context. Further research that includes churches of all sizes would help to bring further clarity to the state of sermon content within the Baptist tradition. Other possibilities for research would include studies of other denominations and theological traditions. Understanding sermon content within various denominations could inform this conversation and future considerations of atonement language. Comparison of denominational results would be a healthy and constructive task for preachers, and expanding the scope to include another tradition would provide quality content for comparison.

Further considerations for research would include sermon samples that correspond to particular biblical texts to see how treatments of certain metaphors or Scriptures vary amongst preachers. This study sought to understand what the average sermon offered in regard to the topic. Sermons that are solicited about certain texts or aspects of the atonement might also shed light on what preachers would say when prompted. Research might also take into consideration how age and education influence atonement teaching within churches.

Future research possibilities also include focus on the relationship between belief and behavior. It would be helpful to consider how particular atonement theologies impact

the behavior and life of individuals and congregations. Studies comparing theological understandings of atonement with one's Christian living and habits might suggest how certain teachings influence life choices.

Similarly, this kind of qualitative analysis could also be carried out on other sources, such as church literature or teaching material. It would be interesting to discover how catechism or Sunday school materials fared through content analysis and comparison. This would further show how churches and denominational entities engage biblical atonement metaphors.

Conclusion

This study began as an exploration of the doctrine of atonement with specific attention to how it is communicated in today's churches. It was argued that the Bible provides a diversity of concepts through which to understand God's saving work in history. It was argued that all attempts to understand the cross do so by use of metaphor. A thorough analysis of Scripture and tradition revealed a variety of metaphors for articulating the meaning and significance of Jesus' death on a cross. It was shown that "Scripture itself, together with the theological tradition, incorporates, authenticates, and invites the coexistence of multiple, irreducible models of the atonement."⁷ This project continually reaffirmed the reality that the consequences of sin are multidimensional, and so is the redemptive work of God on the cross.

Research of sermon content revealed that numerous metaphors are being placed before the church in the faithful proclamation of the power of the cross. Significant

⁷ Green, "Christus Victor View: Kaleidoscopic Response," 65.

findings of this research call for greater clarity in the message today and empower the church to consider what proclaiming atonement to one's neighbor will mean tomorrow. As the church proclaims the saving power of the cross it must return again and again to hear what it has to say to the world. The Scriptures provide a compelling case that the church cannot say enough, cannot exhaust the significance, and must grasp in more than one direction as it bears witness in the world of "what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

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