Christ's Atonement:
A Multi-Dimensional Approach[1]

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Introduction

Since 1997, a central issue in Dutch theological debate is concerned with the interpretation of the concept of atonement and its doctrinal implications for a contemporary understanding of the gospel. Cees J. den Heyer, New Testament scholar at the Theological University of Kampen, published a popular book *Verzoening* (Atonement) in which he criticized the classical interpretation of the doctrine of vicarious satisfaction brought about by Christ, as stated in the Heidelberg Catechism.[2] He blamed the classical (i.e., Protestant) doctrine of atonement for imprisoning God in his own justice, which dominates his mercy and requires the punishment of sin by bloodshed. The Bible, according to den Heyer, does not contain a well-balanced doctrine of atonement because of its plurality of ideas, and systematic theologians are constructing abstract doctrinal formulae presupposing as core doctrine a univocal interpretation of the New Testament notion of atonement.

Den Heyer's book triggered a discussion among Dutch theologians about the meaning and theological status of concepts such as atonement, reconciliation, and vicarious satisfaction. In this article, first published in the Netherlands[3], I participate in this debate on atonement by advocating a theory of multidimensionality of the soteriological metaphors and theories that describe the death of Christ from a different perspective within an identical conceptual frame. To my mind, such a theory will be helpful for a (re)construction of present-day types of soteriology that can cope with the plurality of New Testament christological metaphors.

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[2]C. J. den Heyer, Verzoening (Baarn, 1997)

[3]See W.J. van Asselt, 'Verzoening in veelvoud?' *Kerk en Theologie* 50, no. 3 (1999): 189-204.

I. Atonement in the Creeds of the Early Church

Remarkably, the most important ecumenical creed of all, the *Apostolicum*, makes no explicit connection between the death of Christ, on the one hand, and notions regarding the atonement and forgiveness of sins, on the other. The death of Christ is simply mentioned as a fact in the second article. It is only in the third article concerning the Holy Spirit that the forgiveness of sins is mentioned. In the Nicaean-Constantinopolitan Creed (381), the forgiveness of sins is linked to baptism; while the Athanasian Creed speaks of the eternal salvation of humanity primarily in connection with the Incarnation. The latter creed does, however, mention Christ, who suffered "for our salvation."

The absence in the creeds of the early church of a clear connection between the death of Christ on the cross and the forgiveness of sins raises the question of what reason there was for this absence. One reason could have been that the absence of any explicit reflection on the connection between the death of Christ and the forgiveness of sins has to do with the fact that this connection is made in the liturgy rather than in the theology of the early church. During the celebration of the Eucharist, the forgiveness of sins wrought through the death of Christ is experienced, first of all, as an integral part of the liturgy rather than as theological reflection.[4] Thus, in the Apostolic Creed, the forgiveness of sins as a salvific reality is placed between belief in the communion of saints and belief in the resurrection. The communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and hope for the future belong together as realities experienced in the liturgy. The *lex credendi* is the *lex orandi*: how people pray shows what they believe.[5]

It is only at a later stage that the death of Christ was linked to the notion of the forgiveness of sins at a reflective level and systematically. The occasion for this, once again, were changes in the liturgy. As soon as the Eucharist became the concern of priests who spoke and acted on behalf of the people, rather than a ceremony involving the people as a whole, the immediate liturgical experience of the significance of Christ's death on the cross became less prominent. It is only by the time of Anselm that we encounter an explicit formulation of a theory regarding the significance of Christ's death. He was the first to offer a systematic doctrine of Christ's death on the cross, and more specifically, the necessity thereof.

The second renascence in soteriology was during the time of the Reformation. This revival can also be explained with reference to the liturgy. As is well known, the Reformers' protests were aimed above all against the Roman

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[4]See G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster, 1947), 77. Dix states that "the doctrine of sacrifice was not read into the Last Supper: it was read out of it."

[5]See e.g., G. Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* (New York, 1980); Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, Minn., 1992), 75ff. Kavanagh draws a sharp distinction between "primary theology" (liturgy) and "secondary theology" (theological reflection).

Catholic Eucharistic practices of the late Middle Ages. The Reformers offered a liturgy—especially a Eucharistic liturgy—in which the whole congregation could participate. Participation in the Last Supper was no longer merely a matter of "observing," but rather of active involvement—using the vernacular, sitting around the eucharistic table, and receiving both the bread and the wine. Thus, a new soteriology was needed to provide a theological basis for the new liturgy. This occurred at various levels: through the composition of confessions, the writing of catechisms, and the publication of theological works in which Reformational convictions regarding faith in the forgiveness of sins were systematically elaborated, thus making an important contribution to the further development and reformulation of soteriology.

II. Models of Soteriology

This reformulation of soteriology was not confined to the time of Anselm and that of the Reformation. The same happened in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (e.g., A. Ritschl and D. Sölle). The New Testament research of the last few decades has revealed the great variety of biblical images or perspectives in terms of which the death of Christ is presented. Thus, G. Barth distinguishes no less than seven models[6], and I. U. Dalferth counts four.[7] C. E. Gunton suggest a set of three and sees the metaphors of "victory," "legal justification," and "sacrifice" as determining his ways of explaining atonement.[8] John McIntyre has inventoried and classified the various theories developed during the course of the history of theology.[9] He mentions no less than thirteen "theories" that have been developed on the basis of biblical data. To make McIntyre's rubrication manageable, I shall reduce it to the four clusters that are of most importance to this article: (1) the ransom-victory model, (2) the sacrifice model, (3) the substitutionary model, and (4) the exemplarist model. First, these four clusters of soteriological models will be discussed with reference to the biblical data on which they draw. Then we shall look at the writers in the history of theology in whose work these models are encountered. Here I should like to point out that I am using the term *model* for theories that have certain structural characteristics in common. The purpose of a model, in this sense, is

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[6]G. Barth, *Der Tod Jesu Christi im Verständnis des Neuen Testaments* (Neukirchen, 1992). Barth distinguishes between (1) an apocalyptic interpretation of Jesus' death (part of the divine counsels); (2) Jesus' death as the suffering of the righteous; (3) Jesus' death as the fate of the prophets; (4) Jesus' death as vicarious atonement for sins; (5) Jesus' death as ransom; (6) participation in Jesus' death; and (7) Jesus' death as a victory over death.

[7]I. U. Dalferth, *Der Auferweckte Gekreuzigte: Zur Grammatik der Christologie* (Tübingen, 1994), 260, distinguishes among political, cultic, juridical, and personal models. Cf. also C. van der Kooi, "Dankzij of ondanks de dood van Jezus?" *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 5, no. 14 (1997): 281-97. Van der Kooi treats the apocalyptic and sacrifice models.

[8]See Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement* (Edinburg, 1988).

[9] J. McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology* (Edinburgh, 1992).

to provide a theory that will enable us to interpret the nature of observed events (Jesus' death on the cross).

Following James McClendon, we could also speak of an "evilward" (or "devilward"), a "Godward" and a "manward" type of theory of the atonement.[10] In an evilward type of theory of the atonement, the death of Christ on the cross is especially related to redemption from evil or the devil (Irenaeus; Gregory of Nyssa). The ransom model could be characterized thus. The sacrifice model, on the other hand, could be regarded as a Godward type of theory of the atonement, i.e., a theory that connects Christ's death on the cross directly with God (Anselm; Calvin). McClendon calls the exemplarist model a manward type of theory of the atonement, which views Christ's death on the cross mainly in relation to the change occurring in humanity (Abelard). Naturally, these characterizations cannot do full justice to the different theories of the atonement. To some extent, elements of all three orientations are present in every theory. Yet, these distinctions may be helpful in pointing toward the structural elements that are determinative for a particular theory of the atonement.

III. Biblical-Theological Considerations

3.1 The Ransom-Victory Model

The biblical-theological basis for this model is Mark 10:54 ("For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many"). According to historical-critical research, this text is a product of the post-Easter theology of the early Christian communities. This is not to say, however, that the ransom passage plays no role whatsoever in the evangelists' portrayal of Jesus.[11] To be sure, the form in which this notion has been conveyed to us may have a postresurrection origin, but this does not exclude the possibility that the association of Jesus' death with the idea of a ransom may derive from Jesus himself. This model has had a generative function in the history of the church in the sense that it introduced a field of new possibilities for thinking about the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross. After all, the word *ransom* suggests the idea that Jesus, by offering up his life, obtained *release* for those that were held captive, that something was paid in order to bring about this release, and that there must be someone to whom this ransom was paid.

According to Irenaeus (died ± 200), the ransom was paid to the devil. In his theological magnum opus *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies), he explains how the incarnation of the Son, or the Word of God, was foreordained by God

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[10]J.W. McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology: Doctrine*, vol. 2 (Nashville, 1994), 209.

[11]See e.g., W. Manson, *Jesus the Messiah* (London, 1944), 132, who states that although the word *lutron* formally dates from after the Resurrection, this does not mean that the idea contained in this word could not derive from Jesus himself.

from all eternity. When the Word became human, it recapitulated the whole history of humankind within itself. According to Irenaeus, Christ had to become human because the devil had tempted humans into sin, thereby conquering them. Humanity had become captives of the devil. On the cross, Christ offered himself as the payment of the ransom to the devil. In the resurrection, God reclaimed his Son, so that both the resurrected Son and the ransomed sinners became divine property.[12]

Gregory of Nyssa (died 394) took over this idea and proceeded to formulate the first "theological joke" to the effect that God played a trick on the Devil by offering him his incarnate Son. The Devil is fooled, for he does not recognize the divinity of the Son, veiled as it is under his human nature. Like a greedy fish, the Devil grabs the hook of divinity, which thus destroys the Devil's domain and restores liberty to humanity.[13] However, this view was not left uncriticized. Anselm and Peter Lombard, for example, denied that the Devil had any rightful claim to hold sway over humanity, "for both the devil and humanity are under God's power" (*Cur Deus homo*, I.8).

Reference should also be made, in this connection, to the views of Gustav Aulén (1879-1977) concerning the history of the doctrine of the atonement. Some years before the rise of Hitler and the outbreak of the Second World War, he published a series of lectures (in 1931) that he had delivered at the University of Uppsala in which he pleaded for more attention to the so-called dualistic-dramatic idea of atonement. Its central theme is the portrayal of atonement as a divine struggle and victory, in which Christ—Christus victor— triumphs on the cross over the evil powers of this world. Atonement is a cosmic drama of salvation through which God in Christ reconciles the world to himself. Because Aulén believed that this was the dominant model in the New Testament, which also determined the soteriology of the Christian church for a thousand years, he called this dramatic atonement motif the classic type,[14] which in his view also constituted the basis of the ransom model. According to Aulén, a central text in this connection is Colossians 2:14-15 ("blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and

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[12]Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, V, i, 1: "[. . .] suo sanguine rationabiliter redimens nos, redemtionem semetipsum dedit pro his, qui in captivitatem ducti sunt."

[13]Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio catechetica magna*, 22.

[14]G. Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Atonement*, trans. A.G. Herbert (London, 1970). In addition to the Christus Victor model, Aulén also distinguished a Latin or Western doctrine of the atonement, which had its roots in the teaching concerning penance and that was consistently worked out by Anselm, as well as an idealistic doctrine of the atonement, which went back to Abelard and medieval passion mysticism in which the suffering of Christ, understood as martyrdom, calls people to meditation and imitation. In the Latin and idealistic types of atonement doctrine, the emphasis is concentrated on the suffering and death of Christ. In the classic type, the triumphal tone dominates, corresponding to the role played here by the victory motif.

took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; and having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it"). One objection that could be raised against Aulén's view concerns the fact that the victory motif in the Bible and in the history of doctrine only occupies a place of prominence insofar as the cross is linked to the Resurrection. This is already clear from the passage in Colossians to which Aulén appeals. There is mention of being "buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead" (Col. 2:12).[15]

3.2 The Sacrifice Model

The sacrifice model is a cluster of perspectives in close interaction with one another. They presuppose and explain one another. The sacrifice model differs from the ransom model, which is primarily concerned with victory over evil, the Devil and death, in that it is predominantly "God-directed."

Yet, it is no simple matter to identify the central notion of the idea of sacrifice. The study of sacrifice in the Old Testament is especially complicated because the terms referring to the sacrifices are quite numerous, and their meaning cannot always be clearly distinguished. Moreover, a single term can denote different kinds of sacrifice, and, vice versa, different terms can refer to the same sacrifice. According to R. de Vaux, the terminology exhibits a historical evolution, as well as convergence between similar practices from different backgrounds. However, he distinguishes three basic elements in Old Testament sacrifice: gift, communion, and reconciliation.[16] Through the sacrificial rites, something is given to and received by God, communion is established with him, and the sins of humanity are dealt with. According to De Vaux, these elements recur in the way Jesus' death is called a sacrifice in the New Testament, especially in the epistle to the Hebrews. This letter contains many elements upon which the claims of several doctrines of the atonement are based. Christ appeared once (*hapax*), at the end of the ages (*epi sunteleiai toon aionoon*), in order to put away sin through his sacrifice (9:26); he suffers death on the cross for everyone (*hyper pantos*, 2:9); and reconciles the sins of the people (*hilaskesthai*, 2:17). He makes of the believers partakers (*metochoi*, 3:14) of himself, and establishes a new covenant with them (*diathèkè*, chapters 8-9). Other New Testament keywords that hark back to this idea of sacrifice and that constitute points of departure for the further development of the sacrifice model, are *hilasmos*, *hilastèrion*, and *katallagè*.

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[15]Cf. also C. E. Gunton's criticism of Aulén, in *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh, 1988), 53f.

[16]R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, vol. 2 (New York, 1965), 451-56 (outline of a theory of sacrifice).

a. Hilasmos

The key text here is 1 John 2:2 ("Christ is the propitiation [*hilasmos*] for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world"). The idea expressed here is that Christ's whole existence constitutes a removal of sin. The word used here for atonement is *hilasmos*. Its original meaning is that of a "sin offering, which wins favor."[17] In Greek antiquity, people tried through sacrifices to sway the evil gods to adopt a more favorable stance toward them. The human being (the subject) sways the god (the object) to his or her advantage. The Latin *terminus technicus* for this is *placatio*, that is to say placating, or calming. Does this idea of *placatio* also play a role in the Bible? Do the New Testament *hilasmos* passages imply that the sacrifice of Christ placates God, or do they seek to express the idea that God in Christ takes away and covers human sin? Although the debate on this matter still continues, it is generally the latter view that is defended.[18] In this regard, one may point, for example, to 1 John 4:10, where the word *hilasmos* is not associated with God's wrath but with his love: "God loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Thus, Christ is portrayed as being sent among us through the love of God. Christ is the atonement for sin, not so that God may have mercy but because he is merciful. Therefore, the underlying idea is not that of an angry God who has to be appeased (*Umstimmung*) through a sacrifice before he can forgive unrighteousness.

b. Hilastèrion

In several places in the New Testament, Jesus' death on the cross is called a *hilastèrion*. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, *hilastèrion* is used to translate *kapporeth*, i.e., the golden plate upon the ark of the covenant, on which blood is sprinkled on the Day of Atonement. In Romans 3:25, Paul says that God has set forth Jesus "to be a hilastèrion through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness." Two significant Dutch translations of the Bible render *hilastèrion* as "the *means* by which people's sins are forgiven,"[19] while the King James uses *propitiation*. It seems natural to assume that in Romans 3:25 Paul is alluding to the ritual of the Day of Atonement: "Jesus, together with his blood, is for the New Testament church what the kapporeth, and the blood sprinkled upon it, was for ancient Israel in the Old Testament."[20] In the Old Testament, the kapporeth and the blood was hidden out of sight, but in the New Testament Jesus is "set forth" as kapporeth, that is to say, he is set before all eyes. Everyone can now ascertain that, in Christ and his blood, reconciliation has been realized. The Latin term is *expiatio*, which literally means "purification from sin" or "delivering from guilt."

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[17]See W. Bauer, *Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Berlin, 1963), 742.

[18]See e.g., Büchsel, *TWNT*, III, 300-318.

[19]The Statenvertaling of 1637 and the Translation of Het Nederlands Bijbel Genootschap of 1951.

[20]F. J. Pop, *Bijbelse woorden en hun geheim* (The Hague, 1972), 503.

c. Katallagè

A third version of the sacrifice model goes back to the Greek noun *katallagè* (Latin: *reconciliatio*), and the verb *katallassein*, including its cognates *apokatallassein* and *diallassomai*. All these verbs derive from the verb *allassein*, which means "to change," "to exchange," or "to replace."[21] Thus, in Romans 1:23, it is said that the heathen have "exchanged" the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man. *Allassein*, then, carries overtones of substitution or replacement. The locus classicus is Romans 5:10 and 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"). Although the Old Testament idea of sacrifice is not entirely absent here, the term *katallagè-reconciliatio* points more to the relational aspect. It is the termination of hostility and estrangement between God and humanity. The relationship between God and humanity had been seriously damaged. All proper intercourse between God and humanity had ceased to exist. Through Christ's death on the cross, however, this situation was reversed. Thus the notion of *katallagè* constitutes the broad framework within which the idea of sacrifice as *hilasmos* and *hilastèrion* can arise. However, this notion cannot be divorced from the sacrifice cluster without losing its original meaning.

3.3 The Substitution Model

The model of substitution, like the sacrifice model, is a cluster of perspectives that are intimately interrelated. They presuppose and explain one another. The notions of punishment and satisfaction constitute the most important components of the substitution model. These notions point to a legal rather than a cultic framework. While a cultic framework relates Christ's death on the cross to sacrifice, the legal framework understands the death of Christ in close relation to the law of God.

a. Punishment

The notion of punishment as an interpretation of Jesus' death on the cross is based especially on the idea that the death of Christ was a punishment meted out to him in the place of sinful humanity. The biblical status of the idea of punishment is somewhat arguable because there are few explicit statements that make a connection between Christ's death on the cross, on the one hand, and punishment, on the other. There are exceptions, such as the New Testament texts that allude to Isaiah 53. The idea of punishment derives not so much from the

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[21]W. Barclay, *New Testament Words* (London, 1964), 164: "In classical Greek *allassein* itself can be used to express *changing* shape, or colour, or appearance. It can also be used in the sense of to *exchange* or to *barter*; and it can frequently be used of *taking one thing in exchange for another*."

cultic sphere as from the legal sphere, as is clear from Galatians 3:13a ("Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us").[22]

In the Reformed tradition, the notion of law plays an important role in the distinction made between Christ's passive and active obedience (*oboedientia passiva-activa*). The passive obedience has the character of (vicarious) punishment suffered, while the active obedience of Christ refers to his active fulfillment of the entire law of God. The background to this is the idea of God as the holy Creator and Lawgiver who seeks to maintain his created order in a fallen world. The punishment suffered by Jesus is the means of reconciliation, which achieves satisfaction before God's holy justice. According to Emil Brunner, the idea of punishment contains basic components that are indispensable for describing the significance of Christ's death.[23] The idea of punishment starts from the assumption of God's absolute sovereignty and combines this with a deep awareness of God's holiness over against the sinfulness of humanity. Moreover, the idea of punishment, according to Brunner, is such that it can also be integrated with the sacrifice model.

b. Satisfaction

In its heavy emphasis on the (vicarious) penal suffering of Christ the Reformed tradition took a different route than did Anselm (1033/34-1109) with his doctrine of satisfaction. In elaborating his doctrine of the atonement, Anselm put forward the dilemma of *aut satisfactio aut poena*: either satisfaction or punishment. By opting for satisfaction, he excluded any notion of (substitutionary) punishment. Thus, he did not place Christ's satisfaction within the framework of punishment but rather within that of merit (*meritum*). Christ's merit is of infinite worth and counts, therefore, not only as a recompense of what the sinner has taken from God but also as compensation for the offense that humanity has committed against God. Christ is the God-man who can and may restore the order and beauty of the universe (God's honor) through his satisfaction.[24] The Reformed doctrine of satisfaction distinguishes itself from

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[22]Here Paul is referring to the law described in Deuteronomy 21:22-23. The corpse of a hanged person should not remain hanging on the pole through the night but should be buried on the same day; otherwise the land granted by God to Israel as an inheritance will be defiled. By becoming defiled (a curse) himself, Christ released the faithful from all the curses of the Law.

[23]E. Brunner, *Der Mittler: Zur Besinnung über den Christusglauben* (Tübingen, 1927), 410-29. According to Brunner, "the cross understood as the reconciliatory suffering of punishment, is the completion of the biblical revelation of God" (428).

[24]Anselm's doctrine of satisfaction is very often presented as a caricature. God is portrayed as a Germanic potentate who wants to see blood at any cost. However, according to recent studies, the origin of the concept of "satisfaction" is not to be sought in Germanic law but rather in the private penitential and confessional practice of medieval churches and monasteries. See e.g., R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge, 1990), 227: "Those critics who have imagined Anselm's God as a jealous tyrant, greedy for recognition and honour, have failed to recognize that the feudal image, however unsatisfactory in some of its implications, stood for rationality prevailing against the inroads of self-will and chaos. . . . Anselm uses feudal imagery because the feudal hierarchy provided an illustration of the order which he found in the universe."

the Anselmian doctrine through its notion of *satisfactio poenalis* (satisfaction through punishment). Instead of an either-or, it assumes a both-and: satisfaction *and* punishment. In the Reformed doctrine of satisfaction, then, the idea of substitution is worked out even more consistently than in the Anselmian scheme. Christ fully takes the place of fallen and rebellious humanity. This complete substitution, however, is effected through the "union in faith" between the sinner and Christ, and this union comes about through the work of the Holy Spirit who realizes the union of faith between Christ and the sinner.

Thus, in the Reformed tradition, the doctrine of the atonement is described along trinitarian lines.[25] In articles 20-22 of the *Confessio Belgica*, (1561) atonement is viewed not only from the perspective of God the Father (art. 20), but also that of God the Son (art. 21) and God the Holy Spirit (art. 22).[26] The Heidelberg Catechism, in Lord's Days 5 and 6, did not simply copy the Anselmian (objective) doctrine of satisfaction but rather explicitly supplemented it. Here, as in the Belgian Confession, it is against the background of the union in faith with Jesus Christ (Lord's Day 1) that the mystery of salvation, which is the atonement, is spoken of. In Luther, too, this constituted the underlying assumption of his doctrine of the atonement. In this connection, he spoke of "ein Kuchen werden mit Christo"—becoming one cake with Christ.[27]

In the seventeenth century, one further step was taken by tracing back the substitution to the relationship among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within the Trinity. Reformed theologians of that period developed the doctrine of the *pactum salutis*. In the eternal salvific pact among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Son presents himself to the Father as sponsor for the benefit of sinners, promising to take the place of sinful humanity. Insofar as Christ, in his servanthood, constitutes an Other over against the Father, he becomes one with sinners, who for their part "become one plant" (Romans 6) with him. In other words, the substitution, which took place historically when Christ died on the cross, is a reflection or analogy of the "inner workings" of God in his intra-trinitarian life.[28] Here I shall not elaborate on this, except to point out that this line of thought was recently worked out anew by Norbert Hoffmann. This Roman Catholic theologian calls the intra-trinitarian life of God the "primordial

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[25]See the explications of Th. L. Haitjema, *Dogmatiek als apologie* (Haarlem, 1948), 247.

[26]The article reads: "We believe that the Holy Spirit, in order to grant us true knowledge of this great mystery [the atonement through Christ], kindles a true faith in our hearts, which embraces Jesus Christ and all his merits, clings to Him and seeks nothing besides Him (. . .) Faith is the means, which keeps us united with Him in communion with all his treasures and gifts." See *De belijdenisgeschriften volgens artikel X van de kerkorde van de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, 2ᵈ rev. ed. (The Hague, 1966), 40.

[27]Quoted in Haitjema, *Dogmatiek*, 242.

[28]See B. Loonstra, *Verkiezing-Verzoening-Verbond: Beschrijving en beoordeling van de leer van het pactum salutis in de gereformeerde theologie* (Zoetermeer, 1990).

matrix" of all substitution.[29] Other elaborations of the trinitarian description of the doctrine of the atonement in the Protestant tradition can be found in the doctrine of imputation (*imputatio*), which played a major role in Luther's thought, and in the notion of incorporation into Christ (*insitio in Christo*), upon which Calvin based his notion of the *unio mystica*. In conclusion, we may say that the model of substitutionary satisfaction generates a network of conceptual relationships that is richer than that of the other models; pneumatology in particular is here more richly conceived.

3.4 The Exemplarist Model

The exemplarist model has an ancient pedigree. Jesus' death on the cross is viewed as a demonstration of God's love for humanity. His death is exemplary for us in his total surrender to the will of the Father. This model, too, has become known in several versions, which we cannot consider more closely at present.

Here, we shall restrict our discussion to the most important representative of this view in the history of theology: Peter Abelard (died 1142), a brilliant but recalcitrant Parisian monk and contemporary of Anselm. It has been rightly pointed out that one misinterprets Abelard if one claims that he reduced the significance of Christ's death wholly to an example.[30] The idea of Jesus' death on the cross as an example formed only a part of Abelard's soteriology, which also contained traditional notions of Christ's death as sacrifice. His primary idea, however, is that 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. The exemplarist model can therefore be labeled a typically manward model.

This approach, which was long overshadowed by the Anselmian view, surfaced again after the Reformation in the work of Faustus Socinus (1539-1604) and his followers and gained many adherents under the influence of the Enlightenment in the liberal theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl). The common denominator among all these versions is that Jesus' death is regarded as an inspiration to act morally. The problem with the exemplarist model is that one first needs to define what this example involves and what it is that should be imitated. Furthermore, this model presupposes that humans do indeed possess the spiritual and moral qualities that are needed to follow Jesus' example. Finally, it is not clear how Christ's (repulsive) suffering on the cross is able to evoke a reciprocation of love on our part.

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[29]N. Hoffmann, *Sühne: Zur Theologie der Stellvertretung* (Einsiedeln/Zurich/Cologne, 1981), 46-48. The Father, says Hoffmann, prepares a place for the Son, the Son receives his place from the Father, and the Spirit confirms the Son's place. The Father lets the Son be the place ("Stelle") of his self-bestowal to everything else and becomes himself through his relationship to the Son. The Spirit sustains this relationality in the creation. Thus, the relationships within the Trinity form the basis for the possibility of substitution in the history of salvation.

[30]A. E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, USA, 1994), 355.

IV. Systematic considerations

In a systematic reflection, we cannot rest content with a mere summary of a number of models without inquiring into their mutual coherence. These kinds of questions cannot be avoided, especially if we attend once more to the differences between the models that were treated. There are different strategies possible with which to approach these relationships: historical-relativist, pluralist, and complementary visions.[31] First, I shall discuss the objections against these strategies; then, I shall develop a view that interprets the relationship among the various models with the help of a theory of multidimensionality.

4.1 Relativism, Pluralism, Complementarity

According to the historical-relativist view, the models that are used to describe the meaning of Christ's death should be located in the culture in which they were first put forward. This approach assumes that the truth of a particular model is always contextually determined and that there is no context-independent standard that is universally applicable. The only criteria that can be discovered are ones that are locally applicable. For example, the ransom model belongs exclusively to a culture where slavery is the order of the day, and the satisfaction model is at home in a feudal society. It could be objected to this view that a cultural context is a very complex phenomenon, consisting of an intricate network of social values, moral norms, religious traditions, expectations for the future, and so forth. It is no simple matter, then, to indicate which elements determined a particular model. Moreover, it is always possible that a particular model in fact subverts the context in which it originated and poses critical questions to that context. One example would be the idea of a sacrifice that sacrifices itself. According to Girard, such an idea revolutionizes the entire sacrificial thinking of the Jewish sacrificial system.[32] This example shows clearly that the meaning of the death of Christ need not be a mere product of the social context and moral values of a particular period.

A pluralistic view simply allows the diverse models to stand alongside one another as equally valid theories without making any judgment. Each model is true in its own way. The difficulty with this approach, which enjoys much popularity in the contemporary postmodern climate, is that possible conflicts between the models cannot be settled with reference to the models themselves. After all, the quest for a common denominator that runs through all the different models would imply no less than a denial of pluralism.

Complementarity is another way of describing the relationship among the models. One could refer, for instance, to the way in which light is described in

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[31]It is not my intention to present an overview of authors who claim one of these strategies but to delineate potential positions.

[32]R. Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris, 1983).

natural science. Under certain circumstances, light exhibits the characteristics of particles and under different circumstances, those of waves. However, it is not possible to provide some "higher" formula under which the two descriptive systems can be brought together. Yet, such an idea of complementarity cannot be applied to the different theories concerning the meaning of Christ's death. After all, we have seen that the various theories concerning the significance of Jesus' death interact and interpret one another. According to the popular understanding of complementarity, the models supplement one another and together offer the complete picture of the significance of Christ's death.

4.2 Multidimensionality

How can we avoid the pitfalls of relativism, pluralism, and complementarity? I would suggest that we indicate the relationship among the different models with a notion developed by Luco Van den Brom, namely that of so-called dimensionality. Van den Brom distinguishes between dimensions in the quantitative and metaphorical sense. Dimension in the former sense has to do with spatial aspects; whereas dimension in the latter sense refers to the conceptual frameworks within which discussion takes place.[33]

In this connection, one might distinguish between the different conceptual frameworks with which the meaning of Jesus' death is raised—that is to say, there are different dimensions within which the Christian community can speak of the death of Christ. According to this theory of dimensionality, one can speak, moreover, of a kind of hierarchy of conceptual frameworks, in which the more developed conceptual frameworks integrate the less developed one without eliminating them. To be sure, the conceptual frameworks of the models each have their own distinct meaning, but this meaning cannot be pinpointed by eliminating the other models. Thus, each more highly developed model includes the other less complicated models. They are not separately available. Together they contribute to the richness of the whole. A "lower" model already contains ideas that are further elaborated in a higher model. In order to describe the higher model, one also always needs to refer back to a lower model. Thus, one may speak of an increasingly expanding network of soteriological conceptual frameworks in which everything coheres with everything else and from which no single datum can be treated in isolation. Therefore, one cannot describe the exemplarist model adequately without having recourse to the conceptual frameworks of the sacrifice model (even if one does no more than to reject it); and the substitution model, for its part, cannot be adequately described without reference to the ransom and sacrifice models. All the models together constitute, as it were, an extended chain or family from which one cannot isolate or eliminate a single model.

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[33]L. J. Van den Brom, *Divine Presence in the World* (Kampen/Leuven, 1993), 231-95.; idem, *Creatieve Twijfel: Een studie in wijsgerige theologie* (Kampen, 1990), 145.

4.3 Substitution as Organizing Model for the Other Models

From our biblical-theological and theological-historical survey, it is possible to argue that the substitution model offers many possibilities for integrating the dimensions of the other models. In my view, it has the conceptual richness to encompass both the evilward and Godward as well as the manward theories of atonement. When we employ the substitution model to organize or structure our perspective on atonement, the other models fall into place automatically, as it were, and become visible in their own, albeit limited, validity. Furthermore, it can be argued that from an anthropological perspective the substitution model entwines the various understanding of the human predicament implied by the different models such as bondage, sinfulness, transgression, and separation or alienation, both individually and corporately. Finally, when we understand the death of Christ as substitution, the most comprehensive dimension of the Christian doctrine of atonement has come to light. After all, more than the other models, it enables us to describe the doctrine of atonement along trinitarian lines: from the perspective of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. To my mind, it is possible to defend the thesis that one cannot understand adequately Christ's multifaceted atonement as God's gracious act apart from the Trinity. Without this framework, one will likely stress one aspect of God's atoning work or one understanding of the human predicament to the exclusion of the others and the detriment of theology, both systematic and pastoral.[34]

The fact that the vicarious suffering of Christ is often rejected in the contemporary theological climate is a result of the autonomy debate, which has come to dominate theological discourse since the early Enlightenment. Criticism of the substitutionary significance of the death of Christ was first launched in the seventeenth century by the followers of Socinus and in the twentieth century especially by Dorothee Sölle. In between lies a long history of protest against the idea of substitution. According to Socinus, God could quite reasonably, and without any substitution by Christ, have forgiven sin. In Sölle's view, a person who acts as a replacement ("Ersatz") fully takes the place of the one for whose sake the substitution takes place. Such an Ersatz depersonalizes and dehumanizes the relationship, according to Sölle. The one who is replaced is treated as if no longer alive; whereas by contrast, a "Stellvertreter" or representative retains his or her own place, as does the person who is represented. Sölle suggests that the idea of substitution cannot be reconciled with the self-understanding of the modern person who regards her or himself as

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[34]Cf. also Robert J. Sherman, "Toward A Trinitarian Theology of the Atonment," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52, no. 3 (1999): 346-47. Sherman argues that (systematic) theology should recognize a correspondence and mutual support among the three persons of the Trinity, the three offices of Christ (King, Priest, and Prophet), and the three commonly cited models of the atonement (some variation on *Christus victor*, vicarious sacrifice, and moral exemplar). Unfortunately, he does not explain explicitly how the divine unity of the three persons entails the unity of Christ's offices and the unity of the models of atonement.

autonomous. She regards substitutionary atonement as an impossibility because the autonomous decision through which humans burden themselves with guilt cannot be undone from outside.[35] Within such a perspective, the attainment of salvation would be realized at the expense of human freedom. In this connection, A. A. van Ruler, not without justification, spoke of (what appears to modern, autonomous humanity as) the "abhorrent side" of biblical reconciliation and forgiveness. It appears as if God does not take humanity fully seriously. Are humans not responsible for their own actions? The entire gospel of substitution, and the forgiveness of sins associated with it, is the "worst conceivable blow to human self-awareness."[36]

Two objections could be raised against this problematizing of the idea of substitution from the side of the Enlightenment. First, the idea that human subjects can manifest themselves in unrestricted autonomy and freedom, is no longer feasible. The view according to which human freedom is a timeless, universal datum, independent of the historical position of the one who acts, is a matter of wishful thinking rather than empirical reality. It would seem that the blockade against the idea of substitution on the part of autonomy thinking could thereby be lifted, even though any talk of substitution linked to the death of Christ will always continue to arouse the anger and bewilderment of modern enlightened thought.

Second, it must be maintained over against the autonomy thinking of our present-day culture that it is possible, precisely from a trinitarian, and especially a pneumatological perspective, to speak of Christ's substitution "outside us" and "for us" in such a way as to keep open a place for the "beneficiaries." We have already referred to the notion of the union in faith between the believers and Christ as a basis for the Reformational account of the atonement. Here it emerges that the acceptance of substitution only seemingly involves a loss of self on the part of the beneficiaries because it is precisely the transference of guilt and punishment that opens the possibility of an enhanced identity for the beneficiaries. This implies that Christ's substitution should not be seen as a depersonalizing Ersatz but rather as a unique representation in which humans do not forfeit their personhood (identity) but, on the contrary, discover it in its true proportions and in its full breadth: "whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it" (Mark 8:35).

Over against the autonomy thinking of yesteryear and today, Christof Gestrich has pointed out that, ethically speaking as well, the notion of substitution is a basic category[37] that comes to expression in everyday life. People "stand in for one another," take over functions from one another, or "stand the

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[35]D. Sölle, *Stellvertretung: Ein Kapitel Theologie nach dem "Tode Gottes"* (1965), um ein Nachw. erweit. Neuaufl. (Stuttgart, 1982).

[36]A. A. van Ruler, *Ik geloof. De twaalf artikelen van het geloof in morgenwijdingen* (Nijkerk, 1968), 148.

[37]C. Gestrich, *Die Wiederkehr des Glanzes in der Welt: Die christliche Lehre von der Sünde und ihrer Vergebung in gegenwärtiger Verantwortung* (Tübingen, 1989), 335-38.

racket" for another. In this connection, he even speaks of "Das Institut der Stellvertretung" (the institution of substitution), which always spells an enhanced identity for the parties involved. Thus, he points to the phenomenon of time. Plants and animals exist in time, but they "have no time." The fact that people ever again "have time" is only possible thanks to a certain form of substitution. This ethical, humane substitution, for its part, constitutes the ground of human freedom and thus implies an enhancement of identity. Humans are "children of the Sabbath" thanks to the phenomenon of substitution. In Gestrich's view, sin is precisely the refusal of such ethical Stellvertretung—an attitude that detracts from the radiance of the divine glory all over the world.[38]

V. Conclusion

From the preceding paragraphs, it will probably have become clear that I argue against the idea of a complementarity of soteriological theories if that means that all theories taken together would present a complete picture of Christ's death. Instead, I propose a more sophisticated version of complementarity or more dimensionality; that is to say the various models of soteriological theories describe Christ's death from different conceptual perspectives that are conceived like metaphorical dimensions. This leaves open the possibility of a more encompassing model that includes other models as lower dimensions that are successful in their own rights. It is my opinion that the substitution model can fulfill this organizing role by offering a more encompassing conceptual space" in which one could interpret the doctrine of atonement in trinitarian terminology. Such a model can organize many soteriological insights as constructive participants in an ongoing debate that encompasses past and present-day theologians as contemporary discussion partners. It seems to me that this presentation of a multidimensional substitution model is able to cope with pluralism (and not only postmodern versions of it) because the metaphorical aspect avoids the disease of systematic methodological monism of the Enlightenment and the neoplatonic approaches in Western theology.

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[38]Gestrich, *Wiederkehr*, 338.