

Oliver D. Crisp. *Participation and Atonement: An Analytic and Constructive Account*. Baker Academic, 2022. xi+259. \$29.99 (hbk).

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Oliver Crisp's *Participation and Atonement* contributes to the current renewed discussion of the doctrine of the atonement, but he also offers his own position as a reappropriation and to some extent a completion of Anselm's model of the atonement as satisfaction. For Crisp, the key question concerns the mechanism of the atonement, a theme he returns to throughout the book. Crisp opts for Anselmian satisfaction, yet he also offers a "participatory ... representational account of atonement," a "realist union account" (4), and a "representational union account" (7), which he situates in a "broader context of soteriology" (4). Key to Crisp's position is the distinction between the Anselmian "mechanism" of the atonement, which is forensic, and the "consequences of atonement in union with Christ brought about by the Holy Spirit" (4), which is ontological and realist.

The book is organized in three main sections. Part 1 (chapters 1 and 2) deals with methodological issues; Part 2 (chapters 3-6) discusses "Models of the Atonement," broadly following Gustaf Aulén's distinction in *Christus Victor* between moral exemplarism, *Christus Victor* ("The Ransom Motif"), and forensic models. Correcting Gustaf Aulén, Crisp distinguishes between Satisfaction and Penal Substitution as distinct forensic models. Part 3 (chapters 7-10) presents Crisp's positive doctrine of the atonement, bringing together his Anselmian account of the "mechanism" of the atonement with a "realist union account" of regeneration and sanctification that he correlates with Anselmian satisfaction, but also distinguishes from atonement itself as a "consequence."

In "Chapter 1: Methodological Issues," Crisp lays out important distinctions for the modern discussion, but also endorses some distinctions that will largely determine where he comes down. Crisp points to a consensus among modern theologians that Scripture offers no "single explanation of Christ's atoning work," that it offers a number of motifs and metaphors, but "no single mechanism" (16). There is "no such thing as the biblical doctrine of the atonement." There are instead "biblical building blocks" that may be used to construct such a doctrine (10).

Crisp distinguishes between "motifs," "metaphors," "models," and "doctrines." Doctrines and models are more than just metaphors, although they include metaphors (18). Doctrines are concerned with "truth"; doctrines and models offer "some explanatory framework," and include "irreducibly propositional components" (17-18). Dogmas are doctrines that have "definite canonical shape" (20).

Models of the atonement differ from doctrines in that they do not attempt to provide a "complete or comprehensive view of Christ's reconciling work" (23). Models are "pictures of the reconciling work of Christ," which do not "claim to offer a complete account" (25). In contrast to models, theories offer "generalized accounts of a great deal of complex

information”; theories offer “some explanation of what we should believe” (28). Theories provide “reasons” for thinking some account is “preferable” to another (29).

Crisp’s distinction between metaphors and motifs, models, doctrines, and theories is helpful, but it also weights the discussion to favor specific accounts of atonement. For example, Crisp regularly associates models, doctrines, and theories with what he calls a “mechanism of atonement” (30); Crisp consequently challenges atonement models that lack a “distinct mechanism” (93). This concern for a “mechanism” of atonement is reflected throughout Crisp’s discussion of “Models of the Atonement” (Part 2). A central question concerns “How is it that Christ brings about the reconciliation of fallen humanity with God? What is the mechanism by which this obtains? It is this question about the nature of atonement that frames this present study” (59).

In a discussion of “exemplarism,” Crisp states that “some version” of exemplarism is “necessary but not sufficient” (61). His key criticism again concerns “mechanism”: “[W]hat is the mechanism of the atonement? How is Christ’s moral example or moral influence supposed to be salvific?” (63).

Although Crisp acknowledges that there have been several recent attempts to formulate “rational theories” of the “ransom atonement motif” (designated *Christus Victor* by its advocates), his criticism again focuses on the lack of mechanism (79-80). In addition, Crisp claims that it is impossible to separate notions of the victory of Christ over the powers of sin, death, and the devil from the metaphors of deception of and paying a ransom to the devil that we find in Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine: “Ransom is the core claim; victory is the result” (84).

The crucial section of Part 2 is Crisp’s discussion of Anselm in “Chapter 5: Satisfaction Guaranteed,” building on “Chapter 2: The Value and Necessity of Atonement.” According to Crisp, “[W]ith certain important qualifications, the doctrine of satisfaction provides us with a defensible doctrine of atonement. . . . [T]he mechanism . . . needs some augmentation or finessing” (96). Crisp summarizes: “The central claim of any doctrine of satisfaction is that Christ’s act of atonement is a supererogatory act that is voluntarily offered as a gift to God instead of the punishment of the sinner. . . . [S]atisfaction is an act of compensation or reparation. . . . Christ provides an act of compensation to God the Father in place of the punishment due for human sin and dereliction” (97).

Crisp’s outline of “satisfaction” contains the following themes:

First, God is “essentially just,” and “divine justice is retributive in nature” (97).

Second, retributive justice is inexorable, and God would not be just unless he responded to sin with either punishment or satisfaction: “God cannot refrain from punishing sin . . . because it would be unjust for God to forgive sin without punishment, and God is essentially just” (52). Crisp modifies the standard account by suggesting that the matter of sin is “contravening divine law” rather than “impugning the status of God.” As when someone breaks the law, they are liable to punishment, so when one breaks divine law, one is subject to punishment (102).

Third, the penalty for sin can be met either by punishment or an act of supererogation of sufficient value to make satisfaction for sin, and, in a manner similar to the way that it is possible for one person to pay a debt on behalf of another person, it is possible for one person to satisfy justice on behalf of another. Insofar as Jesus Christ is fully divine and fully human, he can meet the requirements of divine justice (satisfaction) from the divine

side, and he can act representatively on behalf of sinful humans on the other: “Christ’s atonement is a means by which appropriate compensation can be offered to God (by God) on behalf of fallen humanity. Because Christ is a divine person with a sinless human nature,” he is able to act vicariously for other human beings. Christ is able to provide an atonement of sufficient value to compensate for the demerit of human sin – “appropriate compensation offered to God” (106). Despite Crisp’s comparison to payment of a debt (48), the parallel is not exact: “Christ does not pay a debt on Anselm’s view. He offers up a meritorious action in order to satisfy divine honor. It is accepted in place of human punishment. Yet it does not pay for my sin strictly speaking” (115).

Crisp acknowledges a lacuna in Anselm’s satisfaction account in that Anselm does not offer a “complete account” of how the Holy Spirit enables the believer to act in a manner pleasing to God once the benefits of satisfaction have been supplied. However, Anselm was not attempting to address concerns about union with Christ or regeneration, but was focused more narrowly on the question of the mechanism of the atonement (114).

Crisp concludes Part 2 with a comparison of Anselmian satisfaction with penal substitution. Crisp agrees with penal substitution’s primary assumptions about retributive justice that God cannot simply forgive sin without punishment, and it is not possible for sinful human beings to offer adequate reparation and penance (124-124). Crisp’s disagreement with penal substitution concerns the intelligibility and morality of the punishment of one person in place of another. Normally, it is not possible for the sin and guilt of one person to transfer to another. Crisp concludes that various attempted explanations amount to some version of “legal relaxation” or “legal fiction” (144). “[W]hether it is possible for the sin and guilt of one individual to be transferred to another individual remains a real difficulty” (145). In contrast, Crisp claims Anselmian satisfaction as a theological “fall back” position: “[I]f penal substitution raises more problems than it solves, perhaps a near relative of the doctrine that does not have these costs is a preferable alternative” (145).

In Part 3, Crisp offers his own positive account of both the doctrine of the atonement and a “representational union” account of its appropriation as a completion of the missing elements in Anselm’s satisfaction model.

In Chapter 7, Crisp defends what he calls a “moderate Reformed doctrine of original sin” (152), a “corruption-only version of original sin” (153), a “corruption of human nature consequent upon a primal sin . . . but not . . . the transmission of the guilt of that sin” (153). Original sin does not involve “original guilt” (158), but is an inherited moral corruption for which fallen human beings are not culpable (168).

In Chapter 8, Crisp presents his “realist union account” of the atonement (177), which combines Anselmian satisfaction with Pauline participatory language. Crucial to the account is Crisp’s distinction between the “mechanism” of atonement and the “consequences of atonement.” The atonement itself is a “vicarious, reparative, and penitential act of soteriological representation.” Christ’s work is “reparative, penitential, and satisfies divine justice,” not a “penal substitutionary act” (178).

But Crisp also understands participatory language in a “realist manner” rather than as a metaphor or purely figurative: “[S]omehow believers are really and truly united to Christ and really and truly participate in his atoning work and attendant benefits” (179).

Crucial to Crisp’s position is the distinction between atonement as a forensic legal act, and a realist ontological account of participation – not itself an aspect of atonement, but a consequence of atonement: “Here we must return to our distinction between atonement and

its consequences. The mechanism of atonement removes obstacles, making reconciliation possible. Union with Christ actualizes reconciliation via the gift of faith and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit” (204). The incarnation thus has two purposes: The first is accountability for sin, which Crisp describes using forensic language as a “legal arrangement,” and “positive law” (atonement proper). The second is “union with Christ . . . the union of divinity and humanity in one person so that he may be the conduit for union with God.” The latter is logically prior to the atonement, but must be distinguished soteriologically as its consequence (205).

The final two chapters of the book provide Crisp’s positive account of both atonement as legal satisfaction and regeneration as a real union with Christ that is not atonement proper, but the consequence of atonement. “Chapter 9: The Mystical Body of Christ” discusses the church, justification and regeneration as corollaries of union with Christ. Crisp acknowledges that in some accounts of the atonement (he mentions Anselm), one is left without an account of the “consequences” of the atonement, so that it is “not entirely clear” how the reconciling work of Christ touches the lives of particular individuals. (227). Crisp has tried to prevent this kind of “lucana” in the “present work” (228).

“Chapter 10. Soteriological Synthesis” provides a concise outline of Crisp’s argument within a “Soteriological Context” (230). Here Crisp brings together his concern for a “realist union account” of both God’s original intent in creation with an account of original sin as corruption, the atonement as (forensic) satisfaction, and union with Christ/theosis as the (ontological realist) consequence of atonement.

Where does Crisp’s account fit within the current discussion? Aulén’s threefold typology offered in *Christus Victor* a third alternative to liberal Protestant exemplarist accounts on the one hand and orthodox penal substitution on the other. Recent decades have seen an ongoing debate among evangelicals between those who defend penal substitution and those who endorse some version of *Christus Victor*. Crisp’s methodological distinctions between metaphors, models, doctrines, and theories are quite helpful here. To the extent that recent advocates of *Christus Victor* have not gone beyond metaphor, their accounts can rightly be criticized. At the same time, Crisp raises legitimate concerns about the moral intelligibility of penal substitution. By distinguishing between Anselmian satisfaction and penal substitution, Crisp offers his own third alternative to the evangelical impasse.

Crisp joins in a chorus of modern atonement discussions that address images and language found in Scripture and associated with Aulén’s three models: moral exemplarism, forensic and sacrificial language, and victory and conquest over sin and death. Crisp’s thoughtful and detailed discussion of different atonement models addresses the metaphors and the language. Ontology, Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology are too often missing from atonement discussions, and Crisp’s realist union account draws on themes from Irenaeus, Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, and, more recently Karl Barth and Thomas F. Torrance.

Nevertheless, Crisp’s discussion of the relation between metaphors and atonement seems to overlook concerns that have been raised about Anselm’s account. Crisp rejects “ransom imagery” as merely metaphorical, yet embraces Anselm as offering what seems to be a literal account of distributive justice. But is not Anselm’s embrace of transactional and forensic language just as metaphorical as is “ransom” or “conquest” of sin and death imagery?

Crisp claims that God’s nature *is* justice, and that God cannot “simply forgive sin.” But an argument could be made that “justice” is not an “attribute” of God, but a description of how God’s essential Goodness and Love are demonstrated in response to sin either in grace as mercy or in justice in refusal of grace. Retributive justice might also not be the only

possible account. Arguably, restorative justice could just as strongly preserve God's essential Goodness without presuming that God must either punish sin or receive satisfaction. Finally, is the idea that one person could offer satisfaction for another conceptually more coherent than that one person could be punished for another?

Crisp hints at another possible interpretation of atonement that he might have discussed in more depth: an incarnational model that goes back to Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Cyril of Alexandria, and is echoed in recent figures such as Karl Barth and Thomas Torrance. Crisp endorses Kathryn Tanner's critique of recent *Christus Victor* accounts that do not answer the question of how the battle is won. The incarnation is itself the "very means" by which the fight over sin and death is waged and won (85), but Crisp again complains that Tanner's "incarnational" model does not provide a "mechanism" (86). Crisp approves of Thomas F. Torrance's notion of the "vicarious humanity doctrine of atonement" (87), but suggests an alternative mechanism through "representation," in which Christ's acts as our representative and the benefits of his work are "imputed" to us. This however would move from an understanding of atonement in which ontology is at the heart of the model – through recapitulation and theosis (Torrance) – to a forensic model in which Christ's representation is imputed to us. Crisp also refers to Hans Boersma, whose adoption of Irenaean recapitulation he describes as "a strange model of atonement that does not provide a clear account of the mechanism" of atonement (88).

In a footnote (59n2), Crisp acknowledges that his concern for "mechanism" is "not uncontroversial," and refers to what he calls "*atonement mechanism skepticism*." The advocates of the incarnational model regularly challenge searches for a single mechanism. Torrance insists that there can be "no theory" of the atonement. Barth also has no theory. Advocates of incarnationalism tend to question the search for any "mechanism," and insofar as they affirm one, the mechanism is the atonement itself.

In terms of the recent discussion, Crisp's contribution can be set alongside a number of recent approaches that challenge current dichotomies between penal substitution and *Christus Victor*. Both Crisp and what I have called "incarnational" models bring into the discussion a focus on the ontology of the incarnation, and a soteriology of "participation" that is noticeably lacking in other modern discussions. Where they differ seems to lie in the need for an explanation of what Crisp refers to as the "mechanism" of the atonement, and an ontological rather than forensic account of the mechanism. Crisp finds the mechanism in Anselm's forensic doctrine of satisfaction. While writers like Barth and Torrance include forensic language of judgment in their discussion, their accounts of the atonement itself more closely follow patristic incarnational accounts, and they tend to challenge accounts of atonement as literal satisfaction of divine honor or justice, paying of debts, or compensation for disobedience of divine law. There is much overlap between Crisp and the recent incarnational approaches, but there would also seem to be irreconcilable disagreements.