

Re-thinking the Trinity Project

Hebrews and Orthodox Trinitarianism: Jesus and the Atonement

Paper #5

by

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Introduction

One of the most compelling reasons that some Christians hold tenaciously to the traditional view of Jesus’ deity and to the traditional view of the Trinity is the argument that can be summed up this way: if Jesus is not fully and metaphysically God himself, then there is no forgiveness of sin. The purpose of this paper is to examine the validity of that simple argument. Is the traditional doctrine of the incarnation an absolutely essential precondition for Jesus’ atoning work on the cross? I address this question in the context of a series of papers on the book of *Hebrews* because no book of the Bible includes a more extensive discussion of the significance of Jesus’ death than does *Hebrews*. However, unlike my previous papers in this series, I will not focus narrowly on the argument of *Hebrews*. I divide my discussion into two parts. Part one will address the argument for Jesus’ deity from the nature of the atonement in quite general terms. Part two, then, will focus on the argument of *Hebrews* 8–10 specifically. There we will seek to understand what perspective on Jesus’ death and its relationship to our salvation underlies Paul’s arguments in those three chapters.

Part one explains the traditional view of the atonement and proposes an alternative view. I argue that my proposed alternative theory of the atonement has a better claim to being biblical than the traditional view. I explore the reasons why I find the alternative theory more convincing. I argue that the deity of Jesus is absolutely essential to the traditional view of the atonement. But Jesus’ deity is not at all essential to the alternative view. Since the alternative view is more likely to be the biblical one, it follows that what the Bible teaches concerning the atonement does not entail the traditional belief in the deity of Jesus.

Part two explores *Hebrews* 8–10 as a test case. In this rather extensive discussion of the relationship between Jesus’ death and our salvation, what do we find? Does Paul presuppose the traditional theory of the atonement in his arguments there? Or, does he hold a view more in line with the alternative I have proposed? If it is the former, then we need to embrace the traditional doctrine of Jesus’ deity after all, for we find that Paul’s understanding of the atonement requires it. But if it is the latter, then my conclusion in part one is vindicated. The traditional view of the atonement is not biblical. And, therefore, the familiar argument that the traditional doctrine of Jesus’ deity is necessitated by what the Bible teaches about the atonement is invalid.

Definition of Some Important Concepts

Atonement

The English word "atonement" is literally derived from combining two words and a suffix: "at," "one," and "ment." In other words, atonement means "at-one-ment." It is a word coined to describe the concept of reconciliation. If two persons have been estranged from one another in some sense, to "reconcile" them is to end their estrangement or alienation. It is to cause "at-one-ment" between them. The two—in isolation, alienation, and hostility—have been brought together such that they are now "one" again—in harmony.

It is somewhat misleading when theologians speak of the "doctrine of the atonement." One's doctrine of the atonement is what one believes about the significance of Jesus' death on the cross for mankind's salvation. It is the set of beliefs one holds regarding how Jesus' death saves a human being from ultimate condemnation and into eternal Life. So, the DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT would be better labeled the DOCTRINE OF THE SAVING SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS' DEATH. But there is a long-standing tradition of using "the doctrine of the atonement" to denote this teaching, so I will adopt this label in this paper. But it is important to not be confused by this label. "Atonement" does not mean "paying for someone's sins by dying." "Atonement" means the fact of being made "at one" with God. And what does that mean? To be "at one" with God means that God will no longer treat me as an alien, enemy, or stranger. He will treat me as a friend. And what exactly does that mean? If God were to deal with me out of his wrath, he would condemn me. He would grant me the penalty that I deserve for the evil, unrighteous, sinner that I am. But if God deals with me as a friend, then he will bless me with eternal Life. I do not deserve eternal Life. But if he chooses to regard me as a friend, he will grant me mercy and give me the ultimate blessing I do not deserve. So, notice that the aspect of "at-one-ment" that we are exclusively focused on when we speak of the doctrine of the atonement are its ramifications for salvation. Therefore, a "theory of atonement", strictly speaking, is a theory of what significance or consequences the death of Jesus on the cross has for an individual's salvation.

It is important to keep this in mind throughout the following discussion. The concept of "atonement" is independent of any particular theory of the atonement. We must not smuggle notions derived from the traditional theory of the atonement into our understanding of what the word means. Atonement does not derive its definition from the traditional theory of the atonement. In other words, the view that Jesus died to pay the penalty for all of mankind's sins is not what is meant by the term "atonement." Many Christians mistakenly think that it is. For Jesus "to atone" for my sins—many automatically assume—means for Jesus to die to pay the penalty for my sins. This is false. The concept of "atonement" does not specify HOW it is that Jesus put us "at one" with God. It does not include a specification of why God is now inclined to save us from condemnation. It merely indicates the FACT that Jesus has put us "at one" with God in this salvific sense. How Jesus does so is what one's "theory" of the atonement must specify.

Every theory of the atonement acknowledges that Jesus' death is central to an understanding of how Jesus puts us "at one" with God.¹ But theories of the atonement will differ with respect to how Jesus' death does that. So, a "theory of the atonement" is a theory about how it is that Jesus' death on the cross is central to his putting a sinful man "at one" with God. It is a theory about how Jesus' death on the cross has now inclined God to grant certain sinful men mercy and Life rather than condemnation.

Propitiation

Consider the following scenario: A father becomes furious at his three-year-old daughter when she scribbles with permanent marker all over the freshly painted living room wall. The father verbally vents his displeasure, and his daughter disappears outside. Eventually, she reappears. She approaches her father, showing great contrition. She reaches out to offer him a small, already half-wilted dandelion and whispers, "I'm sorry, Daddy." When the father sees his terribly cute, sincerely contrite daughter offer such a sweet gesture of reconciliation, his inner passion of fury melts away into affection for her. He takes her up in his arms and kisses her. His rage has literally been transformed into affection and compassion. This is an example of "propitiation." The daughter's contrition, as expressed in her desire for reconciliation as symbolized by her dandelion offering, PROPITIATED the wrath of her father—that is, it caused his wrath to be resolved into and replaced by compassion. In more general terms, propitiation is the process whereby a hard passion like anger is transformed into a soft passion like affection.

Human salvation is utterly dependent upon God's wrath being propitiated. God is rightly and duly angry with us for the outrageous evil of our rebellion and disobedience. If God were to give us what justice required, and what his own passionate anger toward us inclines him to do, then he would condemn us. If we are to receive Life and blessing instead, it is essential that the hard passion of God's anger toward us be transformed into the soft passion of compassion toward us. In other words, God's anger must be propitiated if we are to receive Life.

It is important to note again that "propitiation" does NOT mean the payment of the penalty due for my sins. The concept of "propitiation" has nothing to do with any kind of payment for anything. It is the transformation of one driving passion into another. How and why this transformation takes place is not part of the meaning of the word. So, how and why is God's wrath propitiated in relation to those he will save? Different people will offer different theories to explain just that. The account one gives for how and why God's wrath is propitiated amounts to his "theory of the atonement." There is no significant difference between how Jesus puts us "at one" with God and how Jesus "propitiates" the wrath of God. They come to one and the same thing. In both cases, the reason it matters is this: it explains how it is that Jesus saves us from condemnation and into eternal Life.

¹ Note, however, that—contrary to the assumptions of many Christians—the death of Jesus is not part of the very meaning of the concept of "atonement." If Jesus had made us "at one" with God in some other way that did not involve his dying on the cross, then "atonement" would have no connection with his death.

All too often—because they confuse the CONCEPT of propitiation with the THEORY of propitiation that they have been taught—Christians automatically assume that “paying the penalty for my sins” is inherently a part of the very definition of what propitiation means. When they hear “Jesus died to make propitiation,” they think, “Jesus died to pay for the sins of the world.” But that is false. For Jesus to make propitiation is to bring it about that God’s wrath toward a man is transformed into a softer passion and friendlier disposition. How does Jesus do that? That is what one’s theory of the atonement must give an account of. It is not a foregone conclusion that he did it by dying to pay for the sins of the world.

Redemption

The natural home for the concept of “redemption” is slavery and the economics of the slave market. To “redeem” a slave is to purchase a right to the slave in order to grant that slave his freedom. To purchase a slave is to purchase a right to his services as a slave. To “redeem” a slave is to purchase the right to set him free.

Notice that there are two important elements to the concept of redemption: (i) the paying of a price, and (ii) the liberating of the slave into freedom from his slavery. It is both things together that are captured by the fundamental concept of “redemption.”

The concept of “redemption” seems to be used in at least two different ways by the authors of the New Testament. On the one hand, the concept is used merely to denote someone’s being freed from his slavery to something. In Romans 8:23 Paul alludes to how we as believers are awaiting the “redemption of our bodies.” What does he mean by that? Right now we have physical bodies that are subject to a slavery to “corruption.” That is, we have physical bodies that decay, get diseased, fall apart, etc. But the day will come when we will be granted new physical bodies. These will be different. They will not be subject to corruption. That is, they will have been “set free from their slavery to corruption.” Or, in other words, they will have been “REDEEMED from their slavery to corruption.” Paul captures this idea by saying that we await the REDEMPTION of our bodies. Notice that, here, there is no sense of a price being paid at all. The word “redemption” is used here to denote nothing more and nothing less than the “freedom from our slavery to corruption” that results from God’s work; but it carries no implication of a price being paid to purchase that particular freedom.

There are other times when the term “redemption” seems to be used in a way that is more closely analogous to the slave market. All of mankind exists in a state of slavery to the doom of eternal condemnation. As we will discuss more fully below, Jesus came and died so that mankind might be set free from its slavery to the doom of eternal condemnation. In other words, Jesus came and died to REDEEM us from our slavery to eternal death. What exactly does that mean? On the one hand, it could mean simply that Jesus died to bring us *freedom* from our slavery to death and condemnation. (We have just seen above how, in Romans 8, Paul uses redemption to mean nothing more than freedom from a slavery.) It is entirely possible that, when the New Testament authors speak of Jesus REDEEMING us, they mean nothing more and nothing beyond Jesus bringing us freedom from our slavery to condemnation. On the other hand, it could

certainly be the case that they mean something more than that. They could certainly mean that Jesus paid a purchase price that allowed him to grant us freedom from our slavery to condemnation. This seems to me more likely. Hence, Jesus REDEEMING us means Jesus paying a price that brought us freedom from our slavery to condemnation

But we must note two important things about the concept of Jesus "redeeming" us:

(i) One can make perfectly good sense out of the notion of Jesus redeeming sinful mankind without any intimation that Jesus paid any price whatsoever. Clearly the term "redeem" can be used to mean securing freedom from some sort of slavery without any implication that any price was paid at all. (Romans 8:23)

(ii) Even if the biblical authors use the term "redeem" precisely because they mean to include the notion that a purchase price was paid to secure sinful mankind's freedom from their slavery to condemnation, it cannot reasonably be maintained that the traditional theory of the atonement is already contained in the very concept of redemption. It is one thing to acknowledge that one's act to secure someone's freedom from a slavery cost him—and even cost him dearly. It is another thing to pay the exact price that is required in order to purchase someone's freedom from slavery. Because we are dealing in metaphors to begin with, we can see how the term "redeem" could be used to describe both of these things. The traditional view insists that Jesus' death purchases my freedom from death by paying exactly the price that was required in order to pay in full my personal debt to divine justice. Certainly, under this view, one could describe Jesus as "redeeming" me from my slavery to the condemnation of death. However, the use of the word "redeem" does not require that such a theory be in view. Every theory of the atonement acknowledges and accepts that Jesus' dying is central to our being saved. And every theory of the atonement can acknowledge that it was costly to Jesus to have to sacrifice his life in order that others might live. In other words, Jesus paid a heavy price to save mankind. The mere fact that Jesus paid a heavy price is sufficient warrant for the New Testament to describe him as "redeeming" mankind. Therefore, the use of the term "redeem" does not, in and of itself, entail that Jesus' death was somehow a payment of exactly the right price to enable him to buy mankind's freedom from their slavery to death.

PART ONE: Critique of the Argument for Jesus' Deity from the Traditional Theory of the Atonement

Traditional Theory of the Atonement, Briefly Stated

There is a traditional theory of the atonement that prevails in the thinking of most contemporary Christians. It is quite familiar. So familiar, in fact, that most Christians assume that it is, incontrovertibly, the teaching of the Bible.

Put simply, this traditional view is that Jesus died to pay the full penalty to God for the sum total of all the punitive justice that every human individual owed to God because of

his sin. On this view, each and every human individual owes a debt to divine justice.² He is evil and disobedient and owes it to God to be punished for his evil. Indeed, the debt to God's justice is so unfringeable that, unless and until it is paid in full, God would be unrighteous to grant sinful man any good thing. The sinner must be duly punished. Until he is, God's righteousness demands that he deal with him in wrath and punitive justice, and not in kindness and blessing. Accordingly, so that he could free himself from the constraints of his own righteousness (so that he could bless man instead of punish him), God sent Jesus, his Son, to pay the penalty that mankind owed to divine justice. God's plan required that Jesus pay the sum total of every penalty owed by every human being who had ever lived.³ So, in other words, it was not enough that Jesus die the death that I owed divine justice for my personal sinfulness. Jesus had to die the multitudes of deaths that divine justice required of the multitudes of human sinners that God, in his mercy, wanted to be free to bless.

How could he do that? How could Jesus, one human individual, die a death that was the morally just equivalent to multitudes of punitive deaths? If Jesus were somehow an infinite being, would that do the trick? Could the one death of an infinite being be the moral equivalent of paying an infinite debt to divine justice? The traditional theory insists that it would. As an infinite being, Jesus was capable of making an infinite payment to divine justice through his one, solitary death on the cross. Accordingly, Jesus' death frees God to bless whomever he chooses. He is no longer constrained by his righteousness to condemn the sinner. He is free to bless him. In and by his death, therefore, Jesus has made it possible for God to grant eternal Life to whomever he wills.

Throughout this paper, I will refer to this traditional theory of the atonement as the FULL COMPENSATION theory. This title is intended to highlight the fact that, on this theory, God has been set free to offer Life to whomever he chooses because Jesus has *fully compensated* God for the debt owed to him by that individual. By Jesus' death, the moral debt that he incurred through his sinfulness (by his violation of God's moral standards) has been fully paid. God has been fully compensated for his offense.

² On one of the classic formulations of this view—that of Anselm—the debt is to divine honor rather than divine justice. For the purposes of this paper, it is unimportant whether Jesus is setting things right with respect to God's honor or with respect to cosmic justice. I will write this paper as if the issue is cosmic (divine) justice rather than divine honor. I do so only because viewing it as a matter of cosmic justice is the most familiar form of the traditional theory of the atonement for most contemporary Christians. However, nothing in the argument of this paper would be significantly changed if it were recast to make divine honor the issue instead of divine justice.

³ Some versions of this theory would view Jesus death as paying only the penalty due by the elect, by those to whom God has chosen to grant salvation. The difference here is irrelevant to the arguments of this paper. However extensive is the sum of the penalties that Jesus paid, it requires that Jesus be capable of paying for more than what is owed by one human individual.

Traditional Argument for Jesus' Deity from the Traditional Theory of the Atonement, Briefly Stated

As we have just seen, the traditional theory of the atonement hinges on Jesus being somehow infinite in his being. But how is that possible? The answer that is traditionally offered is that Jesus is infinite because of the incarnation. Since Jesus is fully God as well as fully man, then—to the extent that he possesses the very essence of God himself within his being—Jesus is infinite in his being. Jesus is infinite in his being just as surely as God is infinite in his being. There is no more plausible explanation for Jesus' infinitude than that he is the infinite God himself.

Accordingly, in traditional Christian theology, the deity of Jesus becomes tightly connected with the power of Jesus to save us from our sins. If Jesus was God—one who is infinite because he possesses the very essence of God himself—then he was capable of paying the penalty for the sins of all of mankind, including my own—thereby making it possible for God to grant me Life. If Jesus was not God, then Jesus was incapable of paying the penalty for all of mankind's sins—thereby making it impossible for God to grant Life to all that the gospel promises Life. On this view, therefore, my eternal well being is absolutely dependent upon Jesus being fully (and infinitely) God.

Since the "good news" is that God has promised to grant us Life, it follows that—from God's perspective—the penalty for my sins has been paid by Jesus' death on the cross. Since that is only possible if Jesus is infinitely God, the "good news" message necessarily entails that Jesus is fully God. In other words, the "good news" message—as interpreted by the traditional theory of the atonement—proves that Jesus is intrinsically and essentially divine. For if Jesus were not fully God, then no salvation would be possible. If Jesus were not God, there could be no "passing over" our sins. Without a *full compensation* paid to God of the moral debt owed for our sins, God is not righteously able to pass over them. If the due penalty for my sins is not fully paid, God has no right to let it go and leave it unpaid. To do so would implicate him in a morally culpable injustice.

In brief, the argument could be put like this: God will not punish me for my sins. God could not leave me unpunished for my sins if the penalty due me had not otherwise been paid. It follows, therefore, that the penalty has been paid. Jesus claimed that his death paid the penalty for my sins. It is not possible for Jesus' death to be such a payment unless Jesus is God. Therefore, Jesus must be God.

An Alternative Theory of the Atonement

As much as Christians assume otherwise, the *full compensation* theory of the atonement is not incontrovertible. By no means does it represent the only reasonable way to construe the Bible's teaching with regard to the death of Jesus. The Bible does not explicitly propound the *full compensation* view of Jesus death. It is not the clear, explicit, and incontrovertible teaching of the Bible. Indeed, it is not a theory that was articulated until several centuries after the end of the New Testament.

As a matter of fact, I want to suggest that the *full compensation* theory is mistaken. It is not an understanding of the significance of Jesus' death to which Jesus and his apostles would have subscribed. In this paper I shall propose an alternative theory of Jesus' death, one that I believe more closely reflects the view of Jesus and his apostles. For the purposes of this paper, I will call this alternative theory the EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY theory of the atonement.

The Effective Advocacy Theory, Briefly Stated

This alternative theory of the atonement, unlike the traditional one, does not hinge primarily on Jesus' death on the cross. Rather, it hinges on Jesus' qualifications to effectively intercede for us. My reconciliation to God will result from Jesus' successful appeal to God for mercy. If Jesus tells God that he wants him to grant me mercy, then—because Jesus is the “beloved Son” in whom the Father is “well-pleased”—mercy is what I shall receive. Jesus has earned the right to be heard by his Father, and the Father has granted authority to the Son to decide who will be granted Life. Therefore, the basis for any person receiving Life rather than condemnation is the authoritative, *effective advocacy* of Jesus. Those for whom Jesus chooses to advocate will receive Life; those for whom he does not choose to advocate will not receive Life. My label for this theory—the *effective advocacy* theory—is meant to highlight this key feature of the theory: that reconciliation to God and the subsequent blessing of Life is wholly determined by the decision of Jesus to serve as one's advocate, and by the fact that Jesus' advocacy on one's behalf will necessarily be effective. If Jesus asks for mercy, mercy *will be granted*.

It seems odd, on the face of it, to propose a theory of the atonement that appears not to be based on Jesus' death on the cross. But that is not actually the case. On the *effective advocacy* view, Jesus' death is absolutely critical to God's salvation of mankind. To see how, I must fill out the theory a little further.

The question must be asked, why is it that God would promise to grant mercy whenever Jesus requests it? The answer, in short, is this: by willingly going to his death on the cross in absolute obedience to the purposes of God, Jesus was manifesting heroic obedience and love. His obedience to God was astonishing in its extent; his love for mankind (it was for our sins that he died) was God-like in its purity. No wonder, therefore, that God found Jesus to be “well-pleasing.” No wonder that God loved the Son as a result. No wonder that God saw fit to raise Jesus up from death and grant him authority to sit on his right hand. Jesus' God-like qualities made him fit to be granted God-like authority. If Jesus had not willingly gone to his death on the cross, he would not have qualified himself to serve effectively as our advocate. Without going to his death, Jesus would not have earned the right to be heard by God. In short, if there were no cross, there would be no advocate. If there had been no obedience by Jesus, there would be no salvation for mankind—for without an advocate to request mercy, there will be no mercy given. I cannot request mercy on my own behalf; for why would God listen to me? I have done nothing to earn the right to be heard. I desperately need an advocate—an advocate to whom God will listen. Only Jesus is qualified to serve in that role. Without Jesus, there

is no softening of the wrath of God toward me. Without Jesus, there is no salvation. And, as we have just seen, without his dying on the cross, Jesus lacks the qualifications to be effective.

One last thing needs explanation. Why did God ordain the cross to test his Son's obedience? Why was did God ask him to die in order to qualify himself to serve as God's anointed? We have a direct answer to that in the New Testament: Jesus was asked to die *for the sins of the world*. But that raises another question: why would God purpose that his Messiah die for the sins of the world? And what does that mean?

Here is where the *effective advocacy* theory and the *full compensation* theory begin to resemble one another. On both theories, Jesus died to pay the penalty that I deserve for my sin. But, beyond this initial agreement, the theories diverge quickly. On the *full compensation* theory, Jesus died to pay the penalty that I deserve for my sinfulness *and Jesus' death fully compensates God for the debt to divine justice that I owe*. On the *effective advocacy* theory, Jesus died to pay the penalty that I deserve for my sinfulness *as a depiction to me of how grave and costly a violation my sinfulness truly is*. On the *effective advocacy* theory, God is *not fully compensated* for the injustice of my evil; indeed, God is not compensated at all. Rather, on this theory, Jesus' death displays, for all mankind to see, just what the due penalty of each man's sin would be were it to be required of him. Each individual sinner deserves something along the lines of what Jesus endured. The wrath objectively poured out against Jesus represents the wrath that could and should be poured out against me, were I to be given what I deserve. It is in that sense (according to this theory) that Jesus died for my sins. He died a death that represents what is due to me on account of my sinfulness.

Why bother? Why is it part of God's plan to depict for mankind what human sin deserves? To answer that, one must note the central role played by the stumbling block of Jesus' death on the cross. Who is it that will be granted eternal Life? It is the one who believes that Jesus is the messiah and submits to him as such. But note what a difficulty that presents. It is not merely the belief that Jesus is the messiah that saves a person; it is the belief that the man who died by crucifixion as the hands of God's enemies, the Romans, that saves him. But how can that be true? How can God's messiah be one who endured such defeat, humiliation, and suffering? To believe that this crucified Jesus is the promised messiah requires an alternate interpretation of his death. He did not die on the cross because he was powerless in the face of God's enemies. He did not die on the cross because God forsook him. He did not die on the cross because he was unrighteous and deserved it. There is but one adequate explanation for how Jesus, who suffered and died on the cross, can nevertheless be the messiah: he allowed it, in obedience to his Father, to display to mankind how serious and grave was his unrighteousness.

And why would God purpose to do that? So that each man might be faced with a soul-searching question when he confronts Jesus' death on the cross: "This death is what you deserved, isn't it?" The one who answers, "yes, it is" is the one for whom Jesus will serve as advocate. He is the one for whom Jesus will request mercy. The one who answers, "no, it is not" is the one for whom Jesus will not serve as advocate—the one for whom Jesus

will not request mercy. In other words, God purposed for the messiah's death to serve as a critical test of each human heart. The man who willingly accepts God's appraisal of him and, with contrition, trusts in the merciful intercession of Jesus—that man will be granted mercy and Life. The man who, in defiance, rejects God's appraisal of him and rejects Jesus' intercession—that man will be denied mercy and Life.

So, on the *effective advocacy* theory, the one who is reconciled to God is reconciled to God on the basis of Jesus' death on the cross. However, it is not because the cross *per se* brings reconciliation. Reconciliation between the sinner and God results fundamentally from that sinner's genuine contrition when faced with the reality of his sin. But, that inward contrition is exposed, revealed, and proven by that sinner's response to Jesus' death on the cross. He will be reconciled to God by his acknowledgment that it is for HIS sins that Jesus died. Jesus will willingly serve as advocate and God will willingly grant mercy and Life to such a one as this. But Jesus does not serve as advocate and God does not grant Life to the one whose lack of contrition and humility blocks him for acknowledging that it is for his sins that Jesus died.

This is the *effective advocacy* theory of the atonement. It is this understanding—I would maintain—that is assumed by the Bible in everything it teaches about Jesus and his death on the cross.

The Effective Advocacy Theory of the Atonement and the Nature of Jesus

We have seen how interconnected are the traditional theory of the atonement and the deity of Jesus. For most modern Christians, there can be no atonement if Jesus is not fully divine. This follows logically from their understanding of how Jesus brings about our reconciliation to God. But notice that there is no comparable interconnection between the *effective advocacy* theory of the atonement and the ontological nature of Jesus. In the *effective advocacy* theory of the atonement, Jesus' deity is not a critical prerequisite. On the *effective advocacy* theory, the crucial prerequisite is that Jesus—whatever his ontological nature—be qualified to intercede for the sinner in a way that will prove effective. On the one hand, it is critical that Jesus have standing in the eyes of God so that he can make a valid appeal for mercy on the sinner's behalf. And, on the other hand, it is critical that the Father be "well-pleased" with him so that he has God's ear. If those things are not true, then Jesus cannot help us. But none of those things require that Jesus be "fully God." It is not necessary that he possess a divine nature. He can be this advocate without having within himself the very essence of God himself. What qualifies Jesus to serve as our advocate, according to the *effective advocacy* theory, is his remarkable obedience and profound love. Whether he loved and obeyed as the embodiment of the ontological essence of God, or whether he did so as an ordinary human being sent by God to be his messiah—either way he qualified himself to serve as our effective intercessor and advocate. Accordingly, if the *effective advocacy* theory of the atonement is right (and I think it is), then there is nothing about the good news of the atonement from which it necessarily follows that Jesus must be in possession of an

ontologically divine essence. Such an inference is only required by the traditional theory of the atonement.

Comparative Analysis of the Traditional and Alternative Theories of the Atonement

In terms of the ultimate purpose of this paper—to determine whether the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is assumed by the book of *Hebrews*—we can arrive at the following conclusion: If the traditional theory of the atonement is taught by the Bible in general or the book of *Hebrews* in particular, then it follows that Jesus must necessarily be an eternally divine being. In that case, the Bible teaches a critical component of orthodox Trinitarian doctrine. However, if the *effective advocacy* theory of the atonement is taught by the Bible in general or the book of *Hebrews* in particular, then nothing at all follows with regard to Jesus' ontological nature. In that case, no argument whatsoever can be made for or against orthodox Trinitarian doctrine from the nature of the atonement. It is important, therefore, to determine what the Bible teaches with regard to the atonement. If the traditional view of the atonement is right, then the traditional doctrine of the Trinity has received substantial validation. It is my contention, however, that the traditional view of the atonement is not right; it is not the teaching of the Bible.

Some of my reasons for rejecting the traditional view revolve around the philosophical and theological difficulties that it presents. In this section I will present a comparative analysis of the two views—the *effective advocacy* view and the *full compensation* view—in order to help us evaluate the relative merits of both views as an interpretation of what the Bible actually teaches:

Moral Debt for Human Sinfulness

Both theories—*effective advocacy* and *full compensation*—share a common assumption. Both theories understand the moral unrighteousness of mankind as involving each and every individual human being in a debt to moral justice. Woven into the very fabric of created reality is the requirement that evil and injustice be punished. What is the penalty due for evil? Death, destruction, punishment of some kind? Whatever the due penalty ultimately is, the point here is a simple one: there exists a just penalty for the human willfulness that is called sin, evil, or unrighteousness. Both theories agree on this point.

It is crucial to understand, however, that this debt—this just penalty— that is incurred by human evil is a *moral* debt. It is equally important to understand that a moral debt is conceptually distinct from an economic debt. This will be explored more below. But it is extremely important to understand that the "debt" we owe for our sins is a *moral* debt, and not an economic one. For the penalty that must be paid is a *moral* penalty, and not an economic one.

Forgiveness versus Compensation

According to the traditional, *full compensation* view, God cannot righteously overlook and leave unsettled the moral debt that an individual owes because of his sin. Unless his moral debt is somehow paid—somehow satisfactorily compensated for—God cannot righteously bless that person with eternal Life. To do so would be to violate righteousness and justice.

This element within the traditional view is in tension with the teaching of the Bible. The typical way the Bible describes God's response to my sin—in the light of Jesus and his death—is as "forgiveness." God "lets go" of my sin. He "passes over" my sins. Or, he "cancels" the debt that I owe for my sins. No explicit statement in the Bible is to the effect that God discovers that my penalty has already been paid by another (namely, by Jesus) such that no longer can any charge justly be leveled against me. Such a claim is commonplace among Christian teachers; it is conspicuously absent in the Bible itself.

Notice what an odd stretch of meaning it is to call what God does—according to the traditional, *full compensation* theory—"forgiveness." Or, even to call it the "canceling" of a debt. How has God "forgiven" a debt that he required to be paid in full? How has God "cancelled" a debt that he received full compensation for? The traditional view requires us to completely redefine key biblical concepts. Forgiveness is not the "forgiveness" of sins; it is the recognition and acknowledgement that retribution has already been fully carried out.

Forgiveness in the conventional sense involves a very different moral character than recognition that justice has been served. To conflate the one with the other—defining "forgiveness" as the acknowledgement of justice served—is conceptually confused and morally problematic. Is God, in the traditional view, actually a merciful God who, out of his mercy, is willing to allow justice to go unserved? No, clearly not. He may be merciful—since he mercifully provided for justice to be served—but he is merciful in a clearly different sense. Indeed, in a very unconventional sense. Given the unconventional nature of this "mercy" or "grace" of God in the traditional view, why do the biblical authors use the language of "mercy," "grace," "compassion," and "love" so freely and without qualification. The traditional view insists that God's "mercy" is not and cannot be "mercy" in the sense of allowing sins to go unpunished. So, why do the biblical authors not take care to insist that we not mistake "mercy" in the sense they mean it for "mercy" in the conventional sense? Why do they not multiply disclaimers in their statements about divine mercy? Why are they willing to praise the "mercy" of God without qualification and without disclaimer? I think it is because their concept of mercy is exactly the same as the ordinary concept: mercy is the willingness to let sins go unpunished. Mercy is the willingness to let justice go unsatisfied.

In any case, this is clearly a problem for the traditional view. The burden of proof rests on the traditional view to show that the biblical authors use their language in an entirely unconventional sense. Forgiveness does not actually mean that our sins are "forgiven"; canceling our debt does not actually mean that our debt is "cancelled"; passing over our

sins does not actually mean that God "passes them over"; covering our sins does not actually mean that he "covers" them from his sight; and God granting us mercy does not actually mean that he mercifully allows my sins to go unpunished.

None of this is even at issue for the *effective advocacy* theory. The *effective advocacy* theory makes no claim that the penalty for a sinner's sins has been fully paid by Jesus. On this theory, Jesus dies for the sinner's sins only in the sense that he dies a death that "represents" what that sinner deserves. It does not in any sense "pay" the sinner's debt. In other words, God's wrath toward the sinner is not satisfied by Jesus' death; it is only averted (assuming the sinner, with contrition, acknowledges the truth about himself that Jesus' death depicts). Clearly, then, what is problematic for the *full compensation* theory is not problematic for the *effective advocacy* theory. According to the latter, God can righteously overlook and leave unsettled any moral debt an individual sinner owes; and he can do so in complete righteousness—it is fully a divine prerogative. If he does so, he does it as an act of mercy; and mercy is one of the fundamental components of divine righteousness and goodness. Therefore, it does not violate or transgress his righteousness to allow sins to go unpunished. It displays that righteousness—for mercy, compassion, and the willingness to not punish are some of the most important elements of that righteousness and goodness.

Death of Jesus as Divine Purpose

Both theories can agree that the death of Jesus was part of God's eternal purposes. Where they depart is when they explain what purpose it served. The *full compensation* theory maintains that God purposed for Jesus' death to compensate himself for the moral evil of human sinners. He purposed for his wrath against the entirety of human evil to be fully satisfied when he vented it against Jesus. The *effective advocacy* theory, on the other hand, maintains no such thing. God did not require that his wrath be fully satisfied. He was morally capable of dissolving his wrath in his mercy. And, indeed, the good news is that God has promised to do just that with respect to those whom he has called his own. God's purpose for Jesus' death, therefore, was not to bring satisfaction to himself; it was to create a dramatic and decisive touchstone that would determine who would receive his mercy. Jesus, the messiah—the one who got crucified by the Romans—is that touchstone. How one responds to him dictates whether he will receive the undeserved gift of Life, or whether he will receive the death he deserves. If one willingly accepts the crucified Jesus as his advocate, then Jesus will do just that. If one rejects Jesus, then Jesus will reject him.

In both views of the atonement, Jesus' death serves as the basis upon which a human being will receive mercy from God. But in the *full compensation* view, God purposed for Jesus' death to satisfy the penalty for sin; in the *effective advocacy* view, he did not. For, in the latter view, satisfaction is not required.

Divine Satisfaction as Divine Purpose

An important ramification of the *full compensation* theory is somewhat problematic. If, as the *full compensation* theory maintains, the death of Jesus primarily served the needs of God—namely, it satisfied his need for justice to be satisfied in order to be free to grant Life—then there need be no witness to Jesus' death other than God himself. In other words, the crucifixion could have been an entirely hidden and secret event in history. It could have been an event known only to God himself. Since only he needs to be satisfied by it, only he needs to know about it. This is problematic in the light of how the apostles tend to write about Jesus' crucifixion. From their perspective, the death of Jesus by crucifixion is there for each and every human being to face, for each and every individual to come to terms with. In their eyes, the public nature of the event seems inherent to the very meaning of the event.

The *effective advocacy* view can clearly account for why the apostle's would understand the public nature of the crucifixion as inherent to its meaning and purpose. On the *effective advocacy* view, the purpose for the messiah's dying is to confront each individual human being with a critical test question: "Do you or do you not acknowledge that this is what you deserve?" But if that is its purpose, being a widely known event—planted smack dab in the middle of human history—is perfectly consistent with its purpose. A secret, unknown death to satisfy only God would be completely incompatible with the *effective advocacy* view.

How they respectively construe the relationship between Jesus' death and God involves an even more important difference between the two views. In the *effective advocacy* view, Jesus' crucifixion poses a soul-revealing question to the human sinner. So Jesus' death relates to the sinner as a question and a test. But how does Jesus' death relate to God? On the *effective advocacy* view, Jesus' death is analogous to a propitiatory offering offered up by a priest serving under the Mosaic Covenant. Such a priest collected the blood of a sacrificial animal supplied by the worshipper and used it in various ritual offerings to God. And what exactly was he doing? How are we to think about these offerings? Does anything in the Old Testament scriptures encourage us to think that God accepted the death of the sacrificial animal as some sort of compensation for the injustice of the worshipper's sin? Did the animal's blood "pay" the worshipper's penal debt? Was it even an attempt to do so? I don't think so.⁴ Are we not, rather, to understand what the priest was doing this way—that he was using the blood of the sacrificial animal to make a ritualistic appeal to God for mercy on behalf of the worshipper? The blood was not construed as something that might satisfy God's wrath. The death of the animal was not construed as some sort of substitute compensation for the unpaid penalty due the worshipper. Rather, the blood was a token of the earnestness

⁴ To see my point here, consider the following. Is there anything in the Old Testament that would support the idea that, when the priest offers a propitiatory offering, he is making the following assertion to God: "Now see here God. This blood means that an animal died. The worshipper is hopeful that the death he caused in making this offering is sufficient violence to satisfy your punitive urges such that you will consider your wrath satisfied and will no longer consider necessary the punitive death of himself."

and contrition of the worshipper. He knew he needed mercy, and he brought something costly as a token of his earnestness and sincerity in that regard.

This is exactly how the *effective advocacy* theory understands the role of Jesus in relation to God. On the one hand, he is analogous to the priest, engaged in a ritualistic appeal to God for mercy on behalf of everyone who believes in him. On the other hand, he is analogous to the sacrificial animal whose blood the priest uses in such a ritualistic appeal. The costly "token" of the earnestness and sincerity of Jesus' appeal for mercy on our behalf is his very own life. Only the person who acknowledges and embraces how truly "costly" and dear this offering was is in a position to have that appeal for mercy accredited to him. The important point here is this: according to the *effective advocacy* theory, Jesus' death did not compensate God for anything in any way. It served, rather, as an appeal to God for mercy, as did the propitiatory offerings in the Mosaic Covenant.

Notice the striking similarity between this element of the *effective advocacy* theory and the explicit teaching of the New Testament. As we will examine in part two, the book of *Hebrews* teaches directly that Jesus is analogous both to the priest who brings a propitiatory offering and to the propitiatory offering that he brings. This is exactly in line with what the *effective advocacy* theory maintains. By contrast, the New Testament never explicitly teaches that Jesus' death was intended to satisfactorily pay the penalty for all human evil—as the *full compensation* theory insists. This fact serves as indirect confirmation of the *effective advocacy* theory and a significant problem for the *full compensation* theory. The Bible seems to be saying exactly what the *effective advocacy* theory says. It never says what the *full compensation* theory says.

Quantifiability of Moral Debt

A significant problem for the *full compensation* theory is the need to make sense out of quantifying a moral debt. The whole point of the theory is to suggest that the amount (that is, the quantity) of the debt that mankind owed for its evil was so vast that only a very, very large payment could cover the debt. Thankfully, so the theory goes, Jesus' death was an infinite payment. So it was sufficient to cover the entire debt of all of mankind. But one can make no sense of the suggestion that mankind's debt was quantifiably huge unless it makes sense to think of such a debt in quantitative terms to begin with.

The whole theory hinges on its being conceptually meaningful to think of mankind's debt to divine justice as being quantifiable. That is not to say that one needs to be able to put a number on it. Clearly, one need not be able to do that. But, while in practice one will not be able to calculate mankind's debt to divine justice, one needs to be able, in principle, to conceive of the debt as the sort of thing that God could put a number on. He is the one who will need to evaluate whether mankind's debt has been covered or not. In order to do that, he needs to be able to think of it in quantifiable terms.

But therein lies the problem. Is a moral debt (remember that earlier we stressed how the nature of our debt was moral, not economic) the sort of concept that is subject to

being conceived quantitatively? I don't see how. One is either culpable or not culpable. One may be considered more culpable and less culpable, but that is still not a quantitative concept in the sense that the *full compensation* theory requires. If one cannot meaningfully conceive of the divine mind calculating to see whether payment has been made in full, then one does not understand the debt being paid by the cross in the same way that the theory understands it. But how can one conceive of the debt in the way this theory requires? Can we meaningfully conceive of our debt to justice as being subject to that kind of calculation? If not, then it exposes a fundamental problem with the *full compensation* theory of the atonement.

Quantifiability and Jesus' Death

On the flip side is the problem of how it makes sense to "quantify" the compensatory value of Jesus' death. How many compensation-for-sin points did Jesus earn through his crucifixion? The fact that we would even ask this question in this way points to a serious problem in the *full compensation* theory of the atonement. Surely, a quantitative "value" cannot be placed on Jesus' death. It is not the sort of thing that can be meaningfully thought of in such a way.

This point is, once again, a point in favor of the *effective advocacy* theory *vis à vis* the *full compensation* theory. Since Jesus' death functions merely as a token offering that signifies his appeal to God for mercy, no quantitative measure of it is necessary. It is not intended to be proportional to the sinner's guilt or to the penal debt that is due. Nothing can compensate for the wrong the sinner has done. He can only hope that God will not give him the condemnation that he deserves. Jesus' death is Jesus acting to request mercy on his behalf. There is no value to Jesus' death that must be calculated, for there is no pretense that his death will cover some debt. It is what it is, a token offered up as a way of making the request. Its ultimate "value" will derive from the heart and intent of the "worshipper" on whose behalf the request is made. If the "worshipper" is sincere and contrite, Jesus' death has great qualitative value. It means that God will listen to and heed Jesus' request on behalf of that worshipper. If the "worshipper" is not sincere and is not contrite, Jesus' death has no qualitative value for him. The fact that Jesus died for him is of absolutely no consequence.

Jesus' Death as Proportional Payment

Both theories of the atonement maintain, as does the Bible, that Jesus died for the sins of the sinner that he is seeking to rescue from God's wrath. In that sense, of course, Jesus "paid" for his sins. That is, it cost Jesus dearly to provide a basis upon which sinners could receive mercy from God. Hence, because of our sins, Jesus paid so that we might live. That much is not in question.

The issue, rather, is whether there is the sort of proportionality to Jesus "payment" that is required by the *full compensation* theory. On this latter theory, Jesus paid for my sins in the narrow sense that he compensated God in direct proportion to the moral debt that I personally owed God due to the nature and extent of my sinfulness. On this view, it is as

if I were issued an invoice that placed a value on my moral indebtedness and that the compensatory value of Jesus' death was reduced by just that amount when some of that value was credited against my moral indebtedness to pay my indebtedness in full. There are two significant problems with this: (1) it assumes, without justification, that the quantifiability of both my moral debt and the compensatory value of Jesus' death are meaningful concepts; and (2) the Bible never explicitly makes such a claim.

Moral Debt and Payment by Substitution

A very significant problem with the traditional, *full compensation* view is its problematic assumption that a moral debt can be justly paid by another. This violates every intuition we have about moral debt.

If my child is murdered, however I respond to the situation (whether I ultimately can respond in mercy toward the murderer or not), one thing is certain: the murderer himself owes a moral debt for what he has done. He deserves to be punished. Even if I choose to extend mercy to him, I must forgive him something that he owes. But another thing is certain: I could never accept some third party being tortured as "payment" for the evil that murderer did. That would be unthinkable.

The reason it is unthinkable is simple: a moral debt is not the sort of debt that can be paid by someone else. That is one of the very important conceptual differences between a moral debt and an economic debt. An economic debt can be paid by anyone. It makes no difference who makes the payment, so long as the payment is made. A moral debt is not like that. It makes all the difference in the world *who* pays a moral debt. The only one who can legitimately pay a moral debt is the one who owes it. Anything else would be unjust.

In this sense, therefore, the traditional, *full compensation* theory of the atonement is based on a faulty moral premise. The whole theory operates on the assumption that Jesus can pay the moral debt owed by someone else, by the human sinner in need of salvation. Is that possible? Is that a plausible, meaningful concept? I don't think so. It violates every moral sensibility we have. It is morally problematic to think that God could justly consider my score with divine justice settled because the innocent man Jesus suffered unjustly on the cross. The difficulty is not that Jesus, an innocent man, was unjustly killed so that I might live. That, of course, can make sense (depending on what back-story we tell to explain why and how). Rather, the problem is with the idea that God could gain moral satisfaction and consider my debt to divine justice settled because someone else—the innocent man Jesus—died. To make Jesus the target of a display of God's wrath should not satisfy his righteous wrath toward ME. To claim that it does is morally problematic, at best.

It seems highly likely that the traditional, *full compensation* theory of the atonement is based, unthinkingly, on a confusion between a moral debt and an economic debt. Clearly an economic debt can meaningfully be paid by another. So long as I think about the sinner's debt to divine justice as directly analogous to an economic debt, I can tell myself

that the *full compensation* theory of the cross makes sense. But when I stop to take seriously the fact that it is a MORAL debt that needs to be settled, the *full compensation* theory loses all plausibility and conceptual coherence.

This is not a difficulty for the *effective advocacy* view. The *effective advocacy* view does not insist that Jesus' death is the payment of any debt. Since it makes no claim that Jesus' death paid the debt I owe to divine justice, then the moral difficulty attached to the concept of someone else paying my moral debt does not pertain to it.

Jesus' Deity and Infinite Payment

A further problem with the traditional, *full compensation* view is its contrived and arbitrary arithmetic. What is the proper arithmetic result of the following calculation: the death of one human being multiplied by the infinity of that human being's divine essence? The traditional, *full compensation* view hastily calculates that it is a death of infinite compensatory value. Therefore, it is a death with sufficient compensatory penal value to fully pay the penalty for the sins for every human being who is ever going to be saved. Really? The Bible never explicitly makes such a claim. It never actually does this calculation. So how do I know the arithmetic is right? Why should I even think that it is right? Without God actually telling me so, how can I presume to know what value the product of a human death and a divine nature actually works out to be?

It is problematic that the traditional, *full compensation* view does presume to know the value of this product. It has all the appearances of an *ad hoc* assumption that is attractive only because it makes the *full compensation* view "work." On any other basis, it would not strike one as a plausible assumption. There is no reasonable basis for assessing the death of Jesus as of infinite value on the assumption that he had a divine nature. Why should that follow? It is a problematic to make sense of an "infinite" divine nature enduring death to begin with, let alone being able to assess the "value" of that death.

A further difficulty in calculating the "value" of Jesus' death as a payment for sins arises when we consider the fact that Jesus' endured death for three days. Three days in the grave is supposed to compensate God for a moral debt that, if paid by the sinner, would require his eternal punishment—whether an everlasting destruction (non-existence) or everlasting torment. Does this make sense? How can Jesus' three days in the grave be the penal equivalent of everlasting torment or everlasting destruction?

The answer, once again, must presumably lie in Jesus' deity. Because he was an infinite being (being God), the penal value of his death was infinite. Here is the apparent calculation: [infinity] x [3 days punishment] = infinite penal value. Presumably, the maximum possible debt due to divine justice is: [number of human beings created] x [the quantity of evil demonstrated by each human being] = a very large finite number of units of punishment due. No matter how many people and how many sins, the infinite penal value of the death of Jesus is sufficient to cover the debt.

Is it reasonable to think that such a calculus really works? Is not the INFINITE value of Jesus' death a suspiciously convenient value to attribute to his death? And does it not seem arbitrary and contrived? If Jesus' death can meaningfully be multiplied by infinity in order to determine the penal value of his death, then why was Jesus required to spend three days in the grave? Why not just one day? Why not just one second? For is not this an equally valid calculation: [infinity] x [1 second of punishment] = infinite penal value?

All things considered, to attempt to place a *value* on the death of Jesus to match the *value* of the moral debt of mankind seems to be fraught with moral, philosophical, and theological difficulties. The traditional view's attempt to solve these difficulties by appealing to Jesus' *infinite* nature looks suspiciously like a contrived and *ad hoc* solution that is entirely without justification.

Locus of Jesus' Atoning Work

Under the *full compensation* view of the atonement, the locus of Jesus' atoning work is in his death. Under the *effective advocacy* view, the locus of Jesus' atoning work is in his intercession on our behalf. Let me explain.

The critical assumption that underlies the *full compensation* theory is that it is the nature and quality of Jesus' death that leads, effectively, to our salvation. So the locus of Jesus' saving work rests in the redemptive power of his death. It lies in what his death did to make reconciliation with God possible. In contrast, on the *effective advocacy* theory, it is the nature and power of Jesus' intercessory role that leads, effectively, to our salvation. The locus of Jesus' saving work, on this view, rests in how his qualifications and authority give him the right to be heard and heeded by God, our ultimate judge. It lies in his effectiveness when he advocates on our behalf. This creates a stark contrast with the *full compensation* theory. On the *full compensation* theory, the power of Jesus to rescue us from condemnation does not lie in the qualifications of Jesus personally, it lies in the reconciling power of his death. On the *effective advocacy* view, it is *Jesus himself* who saves us. On the *full compensation* view, it is *Jesus' death* that saves us. Here is a subtle, but important difference.

Under the *effective advocacy* theory, the believer receives mercy, not due to the nature and value of Jesus' death, but due to the nature and value of Jesus' love and obedience. Through his voluntary death on the cross, Jesus became the "beloved Son" in whom God was "well pleased." And he became pleasing to God because of the remarkable quality of his love for mankind and the heroic quality of his obedience. His love and obedience ultimately qualified him to be effective as our intercessor. If Jesus wants God to grant mercy to a person, God will indeed grant him mercy—not because of the cleansing power or debt-paying value of Jesus' death, but due to Jesus' standing in the eyes of God, our judge.

The two views differ significantly in how they construe Jesus' intercessory role. Under *full compensation* theory, Jesus' intercession consists of his reminding God that the follower no longer owes God a penalty for his sin—that punishment has already been

paid by another (by Jesus). Logically, anyone could "intercede" in this sense. Since it consists merely of reminding God of an objective truth external to himself, who wouldn't be qualified to fulfill that role. On this view, Jesus' intercessory role is perfunctory and relatively unimportant. It certainly does not involve Jesus exercising any discretion. Furthermore, his request must necessarily be granted. How could God deny him? If the debt has been paid, it has been paid. It would be unjust for God to punish the one whose penalty has already been endured.

Under *effective advocacy* theory, on the other hand, Jesus' intercession consists of his voluntarily asking for mercy on behalf of whomever he chooses. He requests of God that God overlook his follower's guilt. In this case, Jesus' role is not perfunctory; it is absolutely critical. Whether the sinner receives mercy is entirely a matter of discretion—both of Jesus and of God. Nothing necessitates that God actually grant Jesus' request. If Jesus' is not persuasive in his appeal to God, then God will not grant mercy. So everything hinges on whether Jesus will be effective in moving God to grant mercy. Hence, everything hinges on whether Jesus' is "pleasing" to God.

The Resurrection and Jesus' Atoning Work

It is worth noting that, on the *full compensation* theory, Jesus' resurrection is not important with respect to our atonement. It is Jesus' death that effects our atonement. Had God not raised Jesus from the dead—according to what logically follows from the *full compensation* view—we could nevertheless be redeemed by Jesus' death. Jesus' death having paid the penalty for our sins, God's own righteousness would require that he grant us Life.

In contrast, Jesus' resurrection is vitally important for redemption on the *effective advocacy* theory. Since atonement is effected by Jesus' intercession—not his death—if he was not raised from the dead to intercede for us, there would be no mercy. Unlike the traditional view, there could be no basis for redemption without the resurrection.

Furthermore, the critical element for redemption is the fact that our advocate is one in whom God is "well pleased." The resurrection announces God's love for and acceptance of his Son. God did not leave Jesus in the grave. Though Jesus died as one under a curse, God declared "beloved" by raising him up out of death. Jesus' resurrection is how we know that we have a qualified, effective intercessor.

The Voluntary Nature of Jesus' Death

Note further how critical to *effective advocacy* theory is the *voluntary* nature of Jesus' death. And note how unimportant and unnecessary it is to the *full compensation* theory. The *full compensation* theory is so focused on the fact of Jesus' death and the deity of him who died that it is logically unimportant *how* he came to die. God could have made Jesus a scapegoat, using him to "pay for" the sins of mankind, and—so long as he fully paid for mankind's sins—he could have kidnapped him and murdered him to do it. On the traditional view, whether Jesus voluntarily chose it or not is irrelevant to the work of atonement.

Quite the opposite is the case with the *effective advocacy* theory. It is not Jesus' deity that gives Jesus the "power", the ability, to effectively atone for sins. Rather, it is the perfect, God-like quality of the love and obedience that he manifest *when he voluntarily went to the cross*. If he had not voluntarily obeyed God to the point of death, he would not have manifested the striking obedience that, in fact, he did.⁵ If Jesus had not voluntarily chosen to die for the sins of the world, he would not have manifested the remarkably God-like love for mankind that in fact he did. It is the voluntary nature of Jesus going to his death that gives his death all of its redemptive power; for it is his *voluntary* love and obedience that make him "well pleasing" to God and qualify him to intercede effectively.

The Metaphysical Necessity of Jesus' Death

It is often taken to be a virtue of the *full compensation* theory that, as it understands things, the death of Jesus was metaphysically necessary for God to redeem mankind. As traditionalists tend to see it, there was no way for God to redeem mankind apart from paying mankind's moral debt for sin. And, as they see it, there was one and only one way to pay this debt: the infinite being, God, had to become a man and pay an infinite price that would cover the total moral debt owed on account of human sin.

On the *effective advocacy* theory, the death of Jesus was not metaphysically necessary to God's plan of redemption in this same sense. On the *effective advocacy* theory, divine mercy is the ultimate foundation for mankind's receiving Life. As a consequence, God could establish whatever basis for divine mercy that he wanted. If he had so chosen, God could have shown mercy in a way that did not involve Jesus' dying at all. But, given that God had purposed from before the foundation of the earth to bring redemption through his Son's dying on the cross—from that standpoint it was clearly necessary for Jesus to come and die for the sins of the world. For that was God's plan for this particular world and reality. In this reality, it is only because of Jesus' death that any man will be saved.

Jesus' Death and the Guarantee of Divine Mercy

As we have already seen, on the *full compensation* theory, the follower of Jesus must necessarily be granted mercy from God. If God were to withhold mercy, it would be wrong of him. The believer is no longer under the penalty of death; his sins have been paid for.

But the *effective advocacy* theory is different. On this view, Jesus' death *per se* does not necessarily secure mercy from God. It is the basis upon which the follower of Jesus seeks mercy from God, but, in and of itself, it does not compel God to grant it. The death of Jesus did not automatically cancel out my moral debt. It provides the basis for Jesus to request mercy, but God must still ultimately decide whether, in my case, he will grant it. God may decide to grant mercy, but the demands of justice remain unaltered. Jesus' death

⁵ Note how much the apostles seem to highlight the voluntary nature of Jesus' obedience to death.

did not change them. And Jesus' death does nothing to determine God's choice with regard to whether he will grant me mercy. If mercy comes to the follower of Jesus, it is because Jesus, his advocate, has successfully moved God to act out of mercy.

As a matter of fact, there is a guarantee that the true follower of Jesus will receive mercy. But the guarantee is not because of the nature and value of Jesus' death. It is because of the nature and value of Jesus' love and obedience—it is because Jesus is the "beloved Son." And even then, the guarantee comes from the promise of God. God has promised that he will grant mercy at the request of his beloved Son. Our confidence before the final judgment finally lies in the faithfulness of God to do what he has promised.

Which Theory is Biblical?

The student of the Bible must determine what it intends for us to understand about the role of Jesus' death in God's saving work. Such understanding is not only important in its own right—that is, in order to rightly understand the good news of our salvation. But it is also important because, traditionally, many Christians have based their understanding of Jesus' ontological nature on their understanding of the atonement. For both reasons, then, it is crucial that we reach an accurate understanding of the atonement.

We have analyzed two possible ways to understand the atonement.⁶ Which of them captures what the Bible actually understands with regard to the role of Jesus' death? It is my contention that the traditional *full compensation* theory of the atonement does NOT rightly capture a biblical understanding. I contend that the *effective advocacy* theory of the atonement does. In the remainder of this section I outline the considerations and reasoning that has led me to these conclusions.

(1) THE TRADITIONAL FULL COMPENSATION THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT IS UNDERDETERMINED BY THE BIBLICAL DATA

Most Christians who accept the traditional, *full compensation* theory of the atonement simply take it for granted that it is demanded by the biblical data. They assume that no other theory can account for the various assertions that are made by the biblical authors. But that is simply not the case. My contention is that any and every statement made in the Bible concerning the meaning and significance of Jesus' death is as fully understandable in the light of the *effective advocacy* theory as it is in the light of the *full compensation* theory. This is a bold and important claim. To ultimately prove it is beyond the scope of this paper. However, while I cannot here exhaustively demonstrate this point, I can

⁶ These, of course, are not the only two theories of the atonement that have ever been proposed. They are, however, the only ones of interest to me for the purposes of this paper. The *full compensation* theory is of interest because it is the basis for a traditional argument for Jesus' deity—for his possessing a divine essence in the traditional sense. The *effective advocacy* theory is of interest because I believe that it is the right theory, the one that reflects the perspective and understanding of the Bible itself.

provide a sense of why the *full compensation* theory is less biblically certain than most Christians assume.

To do so, consider some of the more important biblical claims about Jesus' death.⁷ If we consider them carefully, we see that they are just as much at home, if not more so, in the context of the *effective advocacy* theory as they are in the context of the *full compensation* theory:

(a) *Jesus was sent by God to die.*

It should be clear that this assertion could be made by someone holding either theory—the *full compensation* theory or the *effective advocacy* theory. On both views, Jesus' coming to die for the sins of the world was understood to be a part of God's purpose from the beginning.

They understand this differently, of course. The *full compensation* THEORY understands God's purpose in sending Jesus to die to be in order to duly compensate God for the injustice of human sin so that God can freely show compassion toward those whom he has purposed to save. The *effective advocacy* THEORY understands God's purpose in sending Jesus to die to be the way, in the complex drama that he is creating in human history, that Jesus will ultimately earn the qualifications needed to intercede on before of those God is going to save. Jesus will be sent to play out the dual role of high priest, on the one hand, and propitiatory offering, on the other hand. By so doing, the saving work of God will become centered in the discretion of this exalted man Jesus. By his intercession, those whom he wants to save will be saved. Those whom he chooses not to save will not be saved. That is why God sent him into the world; and his coming to die was a fundamental aspect of how and why he will have the power and authority to do that.

The important point for the purposes of this argument is this: both the *full compensation* theory and the *effective advocacy* theory provide a context within which it makes perfectly good sense to assert that "Jesus was sent by God to die."

(b) *Jesus died for our sins.*

Jesus explicitly taught on more than one occasion that he was going to Jerusalem to be crucified to "die for the sins of the world." For exactly the same reasons as indicated in (a) above, this assertion could be made by someone holding either the *full compensation* theory or the *effective advocacy* theory. On both views, Jesus died for the sins of the world. In the former case he died to compensate God for the injustice of human sin. In the latter case he died for three related, but distinct reasons: (i) to earn the qualification to effectively intercede for the human sinner whom God has purposed to save; (ii) to depict

⁷ Some of these claims are never explicitly made by any biblical author. In what follows, I do not have explicit biblical assertions in mind so much as I have certain biblical concepts in mind. I think it can be argued that all of the following are biblical concepts in the sense that they are, in one way or another, implicitly assumed by a biblical author whether or not they are explicitly asserted.

in a graphic and dramatic display, for all mankind to see, the wrath of God toward human sinfulness; and (iii) to make this representation of God's wrath against human sin (in his sufferings) an all-important touchstone with regard to who will and who will not receive mercy.

The important point for the purposes of this argument is this: both the *full compensation* theory and the *effective advocacy* theory provide a context within which it makes perfectly good sense to assert that "Jesus died for our sins."

(c) *Jesus "paid" for our sins.*

It is with regard to this sort of claim that proponents of the *full compensation* theory begin to think that the biblical evidence necessitates their theory. But, on closer scrutiny, we find that this concept is compatible with both theories. Certainly, it is compatible with the *full compensation* theory. On that theory, Jesus literally compensated God—value for value—for the penal debt due to each human being for his sinfulness. But Jesus "paid" for our sins on the *effective advocacy* theory as well. The *effective advocacy* theory holds that Jesus died a death that represents what each and every human sinner deserves for his sinfulness. In other words, he "paid" the debt that each and every one of us human sinners owes God for our sin. Granted, the *effective advocacy* theory rejects the calculus wherein the penal value of Jesus' death was equal to or greater than the penal debt of all the sins of everyone in human history. But it does not deny that Jesus' death paid for each human sinner's sin. On the *effective advocacy* view, as a representative death, Jesus' death represents to each and every human being the very least that he deserves for his hostility toward and rebellion against his creator. So, each human being can rightfully and meaningfully assert "Jesus died for my sins," meaning, "Jesus died to represent to me what is justly due me for my sins."

The key to understanding the difference between the two views is this: did Jesus pay for the sins of the world representatively, or collectively? That is, did Jesus die to represent what any given individual would owe God for his sins? Or, did Jesus die to make compensation for what the sum total of all mankind owes God for all of their sins? The *effective advocacy* THEORY claims the former; the *full compensation* THEORY claims the latter. But both, in their own way, suggest that Jesus paid the debt that human sinners owe.

Once again, the important point for the purposes of this argument is this: both the *full compensation* theory and the *effective advocacy* theory provide a context within which it makes perfectly good sense to assert that "Jesus paid for our sins."

(d) *Jesus paid a price for our redemption; he paid the redemption price.*

The fact that "redemption" can have two different meanings makes this assertion somewhat more complicated to analyze. As we saw above, it can simply be a word that describes one's liberation from some kind of slavery, without regard to how that liberation is attained. Or, it can more narrowly describe one's liberation from some kind of slavery where that liberation is achieved through a "purchase" of that liberation. But

regardless of which of these ways we take the redemption that comes through Jesus, the fact that Jesus "redeemed" us is compatible with either the *full compensation* theory or the *effective advocacy* theory. On both theories, the human sinner's liberation from his slavery to eternal condemnation is "purchased" by Jesus insofar as Jesus paid a very dear price to make that liberation possible.⁸

On the *full compensation* theory, Jesus' literally paid the price as compensation to God for mankind's penal debt to him. On the *effective advocacy* theory, the relationship between Jesus' death and the human sinner's liberation is more complex, more involved. The *effective advocacy* theory suggests that a complex role was given to Jesus to fulfill. Part of that role was to die for human sinfulness in order to depict God's judgment against it. It was Jesus' obedience to that role that qualified him to secure divine mercy for those whom God would save. Accordingly, there is ultimately a direct connection between Jesus' dying (that is, paying a dear price) and the human sinner's being liberated from his enslavement to eternal condemnation. According to the *effective advocacy* theory, while the connection between Jesus' paying the price and mankind being liberated is more complex than it is according to the *full compensation* theory, it is nonetheless aptly summed up in the concept of redemption. Jesus died so that I might live. Jesus paid a price for my liberation; he "redeemed" me.

The important point, again, is this: both the *full compensation* theory and the *effective advocacy* theory provide a context within which it makes perfectly good sense to assert that "Jesus paid a price for our redemption." There is nothing about the concept of "redemption" that necessitates that it be understood as value-for-value compensation. It could be used to mean that. But it need not be used in that way. It is a perfectly apt metaphor for what the *effective advocacy* theory espouses: Jesus paid a heavy price so that I might be liberated from my slavery to death.

(e) *Through his death, Jesus cancelled our debt.*

On the surface, this might actually seem like an assertion that upholds the *effective advocacy* theory over the *full compensation* theory, but I don't think it does. At first glance, the notion of "canceling" a debt would seem to suggest the concept of a debt being forgiven. This, of course, is exactly what *effective advocacy* theory espouses. The person being saved is given Life because God forgives his debt—that is, he allows it to go unpaid—and not because God is satisfied that it has been paid by another.

However, it seems entirely possible that the notion of "canceling" of a debt could also suggest the concept of a debt being paid in full. Could it not be used, more loosely, to describe the situation where someone else has come along and paid up my debt, thereby causing my debt to be cancelled? This seems entirely possible.

⁸ Hence, whether the word "redemption" is used to denote liberation through purchase or merely liberation *per se*, both theories actually hold that mankind's liberation from eternal condemnation was, in fact, "purchased" by Jesus. Therefore, how the word is being used is a moot point with respect to this discussion.

Again, the point is this: both the *full compensation* theory and the *effective advocacy* theory provide a context within which it makes perfectly good sense to assert that "through his death, Jesus cancelled our debt."

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So, as we have seen, all of the above statements about the meaning of Jesus' death can be understood in a way that sees them as compatible with either theory of the atonement under discussion.

What I am suggesting here is this: the traditional, *full compensation* theory of the atonement is *underdetermined* by the evidence supplied by the biblical assertions concerning the meaning and significance of Jesus' death.⁹ Both the *full compensation* theory and the *effective advocacy* theory are possible in the light of the biblical evidence. Accordingly, the *full compensation* theory is not the only possible conclusion that one can derive from the biblical data; and it is not, therefore, a rationally *necessary* conclusion. Only if it were rationally necessary on the evidence of the biblical assertions could it be said that the biblical evidence *determines* the traditional, *full compensation* theory of the atonement; and that, it does not do.

I may have inadvertently omitted other important statements regarding Jesus' death from the discussion above. My contention, however, would be this: any and every assertion made in the Bible about the meaning and significance of Jesus' death is fully compatible with either the *full compensation* theory or the *effective advocacy* theory. If one can find a biblical assertion that is not fully compatible with both theories, then my claim here is refuted. But, in the absence of any such refutation, I maintain that the biblical evidence underdetermines both theories. One will not be able to conclude decisively—solely from these sorts of biblical assertions alone—which of these two theories is being assumed by the biblical authors. To choose between these two theories, other considerations need to come into play.

(2) THE TEACHING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MORE NATURALLY REFLECTS THE EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT THAN IT DOES THE FULL COMPENSATION THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT.

While, in all likelihood, one can find a way to construe every assertion made about Jesus' death to be compatible with the traditional, *full compensation* theory of the atonement, it is my clear sense that at least four biblical themes and emphases are more naturally reflective of the *effective advocacy* theory than they are of the *full compensation* theory. The following four themes are probably not a complete list of such themes, but it

⁹ If a certain conclusion necessarily follows, rationally, from a given set of evidence, then that evidence is sometimes said to "determine" that evidence. If that set of evidence does not necessarily require that particular conclusion, then the evidence is sometimes said to "underdetermine" the conclusion. So, a theory is "underdetermined" by a set of evidence if more than one theory can be said to be compatible with that set of evidence. A set of evidence "determines" a theory only when that theory alone can be said to be compatible with that evidence.

will serve to illustrate my larger point: namely, that when all is said and done, the *effective advocacy* theory is the more natural context for the worldview and teaching of the Bible than is the *full compensation* theory.

(a) *To speak of God forgiving us of our sins is more naturally reflective of the EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY theory than it is of the FULL COMPENSATION theory.*

Proponents of the *full compensation* theory speak freely of God forgiving our sins. Why? Because the divine forgiveness of sins is a frequent theme of the Bible. But there is a significant tension between the biblical theme of divine forgiveness and what is logically entailed by the *full compensation* theory.

The *full compensation* theory does not entail the divine forgiveness of sins. It entails the divine substitutionary payment for the penalty of sin. If forgiveness is making a decision to allow a debt to go unpaid (and this is the most natural and straightforward meaning of the concept), then, on the *full compensation* view, the believer's sins are not actually forgiven. Indeed, its insistence that human sins are NOT forgiven (in this ordinary sense) is an essential component to the *full compensation* view.

To be consistent, the *full compensation* view has to redefine the concept of "forgiveness." Forgiveness is not the act of allowing a debt to go unpaid; it is the act of allowing a debt to go unpaid by the person who incurred the debt. But this redefinition of "forgiveness" is in tension with the biblical teaching. Nowhere does the Bible ever explicitly explain that it is redefining forgiveness. Nowhere does it even acknowledge that there is a tension between the ordinary meaning of forgiveness and what God does for us. The Bible does not even suggest that there is a difficulty that needs to be addressed. Why? Clearly such a difficulty does exist on the *full compensation* view. So why does it receive no mention by the biblical authors? I would submit that it is because the biblical authors are not writing from the standpoint of the *full compensation* theory. For them, divine forgiveness is forgiveness in the ordinary sense. The gospel is the good news that God is willing to forego punishing us for our sins, the good news that God is willing to allow our sins to go unpunished. He will not require justice for our transgressions. He will bless us instead.

The Bible speaks freely and frequently of God forgiving us for our sin. As I read it, it means to speak of forgiveness straightforwardly, in the ordinary sense of that word. If I am right about that, this is a theme that is in obvious tension with the *full compensation* theory, while it reflects quite naturally the *effective advocacy* theory.

(b) *To speak of God abounding in mercy toward us sinners is more naturally reflective of the theory than it is of the FULL COMPENSATION theory.*

The Bible seems to want to stress the point that God, by sending his Son Jesus to save us sinners, demonstrated how profound and unlimited is his mercy. In Jesus, God grants forgiveness of sins. He is to be praised for this, because, in the light of Jesus and what he has done, we are recipients of the profound, generous, and unlimited mercy of God in the form of the forgiveness of our sins.

If I am right that this is the tenor of the New Testament's teaching, it lies in tension with the logical implications of the *full compensation* theory of the atonement. In the *full compensation* theory of the atonement, it is absolutely critical that God's mercy not be unlimited or unbounded.

God, we are told in the *full compensation* theory, is conflicted. On the one hand, he wants to find a way to be compassionate toward the human sinner. But, on the other hand, he is compelled by his own nature not to compromise in any way his righteousness, not to violate his commitment to justice and moral purity. The result of this inner conflict, we are told, is that he cannot and must not merely and simply forgive the human sinner's sin. If he is to show him compassion, he must find a "work around" to his justice and righteousness. To simply choose to allow a sinner's sin to go unpunished would be a catastrophic violation of his own innate goodness. Accordingly, that is not a possibility. It is inherently impossible for God to simply forgive, to simply "pass over" a sinner's sin, to simply "let it go."

So, what does God do? He creates the necessary "work around." He becomes a human being and, in that form, he pays the accumulated debt of all human sin that is owed to his own divine justice. In that way, he can have his cake and eat it to; he is free to compassionately grant Life to a human sinner without actually allowing that sinner's sin to go unpenalized, in violation of his own justice.

Therefore, what is logically required by the *full compensation* view is that God be seen as, at best, in moral conflict over how to deal with human sin. He is a God in two minds. The gospel, in the end, is not a tribute to divine mercy; it is a tribute to divine creativity. God is not fundamentally to be praised for his mercy (that is only one element of who he is; he is also morally pure and just). He is to be praised for his ingenuity in finding a way to show compassion without being strictly merciful. He blesses the sinner, but only because his just wrath against human sin has had an opportunity to be fully spent and satisfied. The one thing that cannot be attributed to God is this: God did NOT allow his just wrath simply to be dissolved in the depths of his mercy. This view of God is absolutely central to the *full compensation* view: God's mercy, good though it is, is not boundless, unlimited, and unrestricted. To the contrary, it is bounded by and balanced against his moral purity and unbending demand for moral justice to be satisfied.

The *full compensation* view touts this limit or check on God's mercy as a divine virtue. Is it? Is this view of God fully compatible with the Bible's perspective? Does the Bible truly want me to praise God for NOT be so merciful that he could find it within himself to allow human evil to go unpenalized? That is not my reading of the Bible. On the contrary, it seems that we are called upon, over and over again, to praise God for his unlimited mercy—to praise him for being so profoundly good that, in his purposes toward human sinners, his mercy triumphed over condemnation. The good news for mankind is that God's impulse toward penalizing the injustice of human sin is not in irreconcilable tension with his impulse to be compassionate. The latter supercedes the former. God dissolved his impulse toward condemnation in the profound depths of his impulse to be merciful.

The Bible NEVER suggests that it is essential to God's glory that his mercy be bounded by his justice. Proponents of the traditional view will frequently assert this (in one form or another), but I submit that the Bible itself NEVER asserts it. It never suggests that it is part of God's virtue that he did NOT have unlimited mercy, that his justice had to be satisfied first before he could act in mercy. Yet, this very fact is absolutely central to the *full compensation* theory of the atonement. It is, at the very least, odd that the central, defining element of the traditional theory is never on any single occasion ever articulated in the teaching of the Bible.

As I read the Bible, it means to speak of God as abounding in unlimited, unqualified mercy toward us sinners. If I am right, this is a sentiment that is in obvious tension with the *full compensation* theory, while it is quite naturally reflective of and very much at home with the *effective advocacy* theory.

(c) To speak of God granting us grace when he grants us Life is more naturally reflective of the EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY theory than it is of the FULL COMPENSATION theory.

Our salvation is quite frequently attributed to God's grace in the New Testament. Certainly both views can, in terms of their theory, legitimately describe salvation as being a gift of God's grace. But there is a dimension to the biblical teaching that strikes one as odd *vis à vis* the *full compensation* theory of the atonement. Does one ever get the sense from the biblical teaching that the human sinner has become *entitled* to eternal Life? Does one ever get the sense that God has now been put in a situation where to deny eternal Life to the follower of Jesus would be a violation of justice?

Exactly that is what the *full compensation* theory purports. It is essential to the very spirit of the *full compensation* theory that, because of what Jesus has accomplished on behalf of his followers, God dare not deny them the blessing of eternal Life. Jesus has so fully paid the debt for my sinfulness (for all time) that God has no just charge he can level against me for which he could condemn me. Therefore, how could he justly withhold the blessing of eternal Life?

The spirit of the *full compensation* theory at this point strikes me as being in irreconcilable tension with the whole tenor of the gospel as described in the New Testament. The Bible never encourages the believer to have a sense of entitlement, to base his confidence in his eternal destiny in his newfound, inherent blamelessness, attained for him by Jesus. Rather, the believer is to base his confidence in his eternal destiny in the promise of God and in the faithfulness of God to keep that which he has promised. In other words, his confidence is in the promised grace of God, not in the justice of the situation he now finds himself in.

As a corollary to this point, note how the *full compensation* theory pits Jesus against God—in a sort of divine good cop, bad cop. God, the transcendent Father, holds the line on justice and moral purity. But, in the form of Jesus, he demonstrates grace, compassion, and mercy. The Father is resolved to condemn. The Son is intent on showing mercy. The good news, on this view, is that the Son ultimately puts the Father in a position where, in order to hold the line on justice, he must necessarily grant Life and blessing. Divine

mercy, therefore, is the work of God in the Son. Divine justice is the unbending commitment of the Father. Is that right? Is that the sense one would have from reading the New Testament? Again, I don't think so. The New Testament always seems to assume an intrinsic unity between the love of Jesus for human sinners and the love of his Father for human sinners. It always assumes that the grace, mercy, and compassion of the Father are what is displayed in the grace, mercy, and compassion of Jesus. The Bible never even hints at the possibility that they are pitted against one another, that they are working at cross-purposes. It never suggests that they are two different poles of a unified work of mercy. They are not opposite poles. Jesus and his Father are working hand-in-glove to save mankind from eternal destruction.

As I read the Bible, it means to speak of God as granting salvation as a free, voluntary gift that flows out of the depths of his mercy and compassion. Jesus has not tricked him into having to bless the believer. He has not even tricked himself into having no choice but to grant Life. When it comes to one's final destiny, God will either freely, from his grace, grant Life, or he will not. Granted, Jesus has played a central role in the story behind this act of divine grace. But nothing Jesus has done has obligated God in any way to grant blessing rather than condemnation. When God grants the blessing of Life, it is because he has freely chosen to act in grace. If I am right, this is a sentiment that is in irreconcilable tension with the *full compensation* theory. But it is very much at home with the *effective advocacy* theory.

(d) To speak of God granting authority to Jesus to decide who will live and who will die is more naturally reflective of the EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY theory than it is of the FULL COMPENSATION theory.

Jesus' teaching in John 5 is quite explicit. He describes himself as having been granted authority by God to determine who will be granted Life and who will be condemned. Jesus sees it as part and parcel of his status as the messiah, the Son of God, that he should be given the privilege of performing this role. Jesus' point in John 5 (and probably elsewhere) is that a prerogative that inherently belongs to the transcendent God—the prerogative to decide who will receive his mercy—has been put into the hands of a man, Jesus.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that what Jesus is seeking to describe in this teaching is the ultimate judgment that will occur at the final judgment. He is not describing some less ultimate act that God has given him to do. He is describing the actual role of functioning as judge at the ultimate, final judgment. So, the startling point he is making is this: the man Jesus is the one that will decide the fate of every human being at the final judgment.¹⁰ And, most importantly, if Jesus' authority at the final

¹⁰ It makes no real difference whether the "final judgment" is a literal event or only functions as a metaphor for some other reality. Either way, it is the ultimate decider of the fate of every human being; and Jesus' point is that he, the man Jesus, will be the ultimate decider. God has delegated his inherent authority to be this ultimate decider to Jesus.

judgment is the authority of God delegated to and embodied in him, then *it is the authority to use his own discretion in deciding who will live and who will die.*

If I am right in how I understand the picture that Jesus is painting, it is significantly incongruous with the picture offered by the *full compensation* theory. In the *full compensation* theory, Jesus purchases eternal Life for those who believe in him and become his followers. If and when one genuinely chooses to believe in Jesus, his debt to sin becomes "paid in full" out of the penal value attached to the death of Jesus. Herein lies the tension: if the believer who stands at the final judgment seat has, through his belief, rendered his debt to sin fully paid, where is there any room for Jesus to exercise discretion with respect to who will be granted life? Hasn't this determination already been made? In the terms of the *full compensation* view, Jesus' teaching in John 5 is a significant *non sequitur*. There is no room for God himself to exercise any discretion at the judgment seat, let alone Jesus. John 5 does not clearly and easily reflect the *full compensation* theory of the atonement.

The *effective advocacy* theory of the atonement is quite compatible with John 5. On the *effective advocacy* theory, neither God, nor Jesus, is obligated or compelled to grant eternal Life to anyone. Jesus, in an act of mercy, died for the human sinner in an act whereby he appealed to God for mercy. Is God required to grant mercy in response to this appeal? No, absolutely not. If he does so, it is because he, at his discretion, has decided he wants to be merciful to that particular sinner.

Fast forward to the final judgment. A believer in Jesus comes before the judgment seat. Does the fact that he has believed in Jesus during his lifetime obligate the judge (whether that be God, or Jesus) to forgive him for his sins and grant him Life? No, absolutely not. If the judge does so, it is because, at his discretion, he has decided he wants to be merciful to that particular sinner. Granted, this judge will have been obligated by his promise. For Jesus revealed to us that God has promised to grant mercy to the one who attaches himself to Jesus. But what obligates the judge is not the death of Jesus; it is the promise that God has made. And what obligates the judge is not the belief of the believer; it is the fact that God must be faithful to his promise to grant Life to the one who believes.

So, the judge's decision is not already decided by some external factor. Given that, at his own discretion, the judge must decide whether to be merciful (and whether to be faithful to God's promise). It makes sense, therefore—as John 5 teaches—that such discretion has been granted to the man, Jesus.

On my interpretation, the Bible intends to describe a reality where the man, Jesus, will ultimately use his discretion in deciding whether I shall or shall not be granted Life. If this interpretation is right, then there is a significant incongruity between what the Bible portrays and what is entailed by the *full compensation* theory. On the other hand, what is entailed by the *effective advocacy* theory is perfectly in harmony with this reading of the Bible.

(e) To emphasize Jesus' role as intercessor is more naturally reflective of the *EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY* theory than it is of the *FULL COMPENSATION* theory.

(f) To emphasize Jesus' resurrection in the context of our salvation is more naturally reflective of the *EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY* theory than it is of the *FULL COMPENSATION* theory.

(g) To emphasize the voluntary nature of Jesus' death is more naturally reflective of the *EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY* theory than it is of the *FULL COMPENSATION* theory.

All of these themes seem to exist in the warp and woof of the discussion of the gospel in the New Testament: (i) the fact that Jesus' plays the critical role of being our intercessor in the presence of God, (ii) the importance of the resurrection to our salvation, and (iii) the voluntary nature of Jesus' death. As we discussed above, none of these three emphases are exactly at home in the context of the *full compensation* theory of the atonement. If the nature, quality, and value of Jesus' death is what does all the heavy lifting with respect to bringing about the forgiveness of our sins and salvation—as the *full compensation* theory tends to suggest—then why would it matter one way or the other whether Jesus intercedes for us? And why would it matter whether Jesus was raised from the dead? At least, how would that be relevant to my salvation? And if it is strictly the fact that the sins of mankind were placed on Jesus and, in his death, he bore the penalty for the sins, then what difference would it make for our salvation whether he bore them willingly and voluntarily or whether they were placed on him involuntarily?

My point is this, the biblical emphases on these three themes, an emphasis that tends to connect them closely to our salvation, is not explicable in terms of the *full compensation* theory of the atonement. But it is utterly explicable in terms of the *effective advocacy* theory of the atonement.

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So, as we have seen, many of the emphases or themes of the Bible's teaching with regard to Jesus' role in our salvation seem, on every point, to be more in harmony with the assumptions of the *effective advocacy* theory of the atonement than they are with the *full compensation* theory of the atonement. The overall conclusion is that the *effective advocacy* theory more naturally captures and represents the teaching of the Bible than does the *full compensation* theory.

(3) THE TRADITIONAL FULL COMPENSATION THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT IS PHILOSOPHICALLY AND MORALLY INFERIOR TO THE EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY THEORY.

As I already discussed in our earlier analysis of these two theories, the traditional, *full compensation* theory of the atonement contains several significant moral, philosophical, and theological problems. I will only briefly remind the reader of some of the more important of those problems here:

(a) It is philosophically problematic to think that a moral debt can be meaningfully and coherently quantified. It is not the sort of thing that can be meaningfully quantified.

(b) It is morally objectionable to propose that a moral debt can be paid by a substitute. It is problematic to think that one who has incurred a moral debt can have his debt paid by another. Only the punishment of the person who has incurred a moral debt can legitimately and meaningfully pay that debt. Arguably, to punish Jesus for the moral debt incurred by me is a grave violation of justice. And even if it is not an injustice to Jesus—because of the distinctive nature of the incarnation—it is still problematic to view my debt as duly and legitimately paid by Jesus' death. How am I duly and justly recompensed by Jesus being punished?

(c) Even if one can get passed the objection that a moral debt cannot be paid by a substitute, then it is philosophically problematic to think that the penal value of that punishment (e.g., Jesus' death) can be meaningfully and coherently quantified. It is not the sort of thing that can be meaningfully quantified.

(d) Even if one could successfully make a case for Jesus' death being conceived of in quantitative terms, it is philosophically problematic to assume that the infinity of Jesus' being (since he is divine) renders the penal value of his death infinite.

(e) Indeed, it is philosophically problematic, in the first place, to think in terms of Jesus' divine nature being infinite. What does it mean to have a nature that is infinite? One cannot make an argument founded upon the "infinity" of Jesus' divine essence until he has established that having an "infinite" being is a meaningful and coherent concept in the first place. Is it even meaningful to attribute an infinite nature to God? Or is an "infinite nature" a philosophical fiction that has not real content? If God were truly "infinite" (that is, without boundaries) then wouldn't he be evil as well as good?¹¹

(f) It is philosophically problematic to hold that time spent in the grave is the penal equivalent of eternal condemnation. Even if one holds that Jesus—for three days—underwent the same anguish (torment, tribulation, destruction, or whatever) that awaits the condemned sinner in eternity, how can one hold that his temporary enduring of divine wrath is the penal equivalent of the eternal enduring of that divine wrath? One must show that the temporary infliction of divine wrath is not *qualitatively* different from the permanent infliction of divine wrath. For, if they are qualitatively different, then the calculation that the temporary infliction of divine wrath multiplied by the infinite nature of Jesus is an infinite infliction of divine wrath is a problematic arithmetic. For surely an apple multiplied by an infinity of being would not result in an infinite orange, would it?

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There are perhaps other difficulties with the *full compensation* theory. I have listed the more important ones that come quickly to mind. The *effective advocacy* theory of the

¹¹ Arguably, the Hindu concept of the ultimate being being beyond the distinction of good and evil and, therefore, being evil just as surely as he is good is a concept that arises from the belief that the ultimate being is infinite. This is a concept of God that is utterly alien to the biblical worldview. I do not believe the notion that God is "infinite" is a biblical notion at all.

atonement contains none of these same problems. Indeed, I would submit that it involves no significant moral, philosophical, or theological problems. If I am right, then, the *effective advocacy* theory is morally, philosophically, and theologically superior to the *full compensation* theory.

(4) CRITICAL ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING THE TRADITIONAL FULL COMPENSATION THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT ARE QUITE PROBABLY UNTENABLE.

Several of the morally or philosophically problematic notions listed in (3) above are assumed by the *full compensation* theory and are absolutely essential prerequisites to its being true. They are not incidental features of the theory. The whole theory hinges on these very assumptions. Therefore, the *full compensation* theory of the atonement is founded on a whole set of assumptions that are—from all appearances and until proved otherwise—morally and philosophically untenable. In contrast, it would seem that the assumptions underlying the *effective advocacy* theory of the atonement are perfectly tenable.

(5) THE PROBLEMATIC ASSUMPTIONS THAT UNDERLIE THE TRADITIONAL FULL COMPENSATION THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT ARE NEVER EXPLICITLY ASSERTED BY ANY BIBLICAL AUTHOR.

I have listed several problems with the concepts and assumptions that underlie the *full compensation* theory of the atonement. Some of them are morally, philosophically, or theologically problematic and, hence, appear to be untenable. Others are in tension with the tenor and identifiable themes of the Bible such that they do not seem to be compatible with the biblical teaching and its worldview. These two facts, in and of themselves, do not prove that the *full compensation* theory is wrong. My commitment to the nature of biblical authority is such that, no matter how problematic a belief or assumption might seem to me, if it is explicitly taught by a biblical author, then I must conclude that I am mistaken in my judgment that it is untenable. Therefore, if the problematic assumptions underlying the traditional *full compensation* theory were somewhere explicitly asserted by the Bible, then it would be irrelevant how problematic they might seem. Biblical authority would encourage me to adjust my thinking to conform to its explicit teaching rather than pass judgment on its explicit teaching on the basis of what appears tenable to me.

But, in fact, that is not the situation we find ourselves in. No biblical author ever explicitly asserts the problematic assumptions that I have discussed above—assumptions that are absolutely essential to the *full compensation* theory. All of them are simply assumed by proponents of the theory. They are read into or imposed on the biblical text. None of them is clearly, explicitly, and incontrovertibly asserted by the Bible itself.

Indeed there are some other critical assumptions that underlie the *full compensation* theory that are not taught by the Bible either. These assumptions are not in obvious conflict with the Bible or morality or philosophy—they are perfectly tenable in and of

themselves. But the Bible does not explicitly assert them anywhere.¹² The proponents of the *full compensation* theory assume them; but they are never explicitly taught or asserted by any biblical author.

When we put all of this together, most of the essential assumptions upon which the *full compensation* theory hinges are NEVER explicitly endorsed by the biblical teaching—and several of those assumptions are problematic and controversial for one reason or another.

(6) IN THE LIGHT OF ALL OF THE ABOVE, IT IS MORE REASONABLE TO HOLD THE EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT THAN IT IS TO HOLD THE FULL COMPENSATION THEORY OF THE ATONEMENT.

In the light of all of the above considerations, it is more reasonable to conclude that Jesus and the apostles understood the death of Jesus' along lines similar to the *effective advocacy* theory of the atonement than to conclude that they understood his death along lines similar to the *full compensation* theory of the atonement.

Conclusion: The Failure of the Argument for Jesus' Deity from the Atonement

As we stated above, there is a commonly accepted argument for the doctrine of the Trinity (or, more specifically, for the deity of Jesus) that is based on the fact of the atonement. It argues, "If Jesus is not God, then there is no forgiveness of sins." But, as we have seen, this argument is based solely and exclusively on the *full compensation* theory of the atonement. But the *full compensation* theory of the atonement—traditional and widely accepted though it is—is not correct. At least, it is not reasonable to think so. It is very unlikely that this view accurately captures the perspective of the New Testament. Therefore, it is not reasonable to base one's belief in the deity of Jesus on the fact of the atonement. The argument "if Jesus is not God, our sins are not forgiven" is utterly dependent on a mistaken theory of the atonement. Under another, more accurate understanding of the atonement, the deity of Jesus would not be required at all. To be more precise, a more accurate understanding of the atonement does not entail that Jesus must possess in his very own being the very essence of God himself. Atonement through the death of Jesus can be a perfectly coherent and reasonable fact even if, in his ontology, Jesus is an ordinary human being.

PART TWO: Does *Hebrews* Require the Traditional Theory of the Atonement?

¹² So, for example, it is essential to the *full compensation* theory that it is the very nature of Jesus' death itself that guarantees that the believer's sins will receive forgiveness. Perhaps it could be maintained that this assumption is morally, philosophically, and theologically tenable. Nevertheless, this critical assumption is most definitely not an assumption that is ever explicitly asserted anywhere in the Bible. It is assumed by the proponents of the *full compensation* theory without any explicit biblical support.

<yet to be written>

Conclusion

<yet to be written>