Abstract

Even though John Wesley claimed that the atonement was crucial to his theology, he never articulated a systematic theory of the atonement. This paper explores the way in which the atonement functions within his theology as the best approach for deciphering his understanding of the atonement as a foundational concept for his moral theology. The cross functions in his via salutis in two ways. It plays a substitutionary role in the removal of sin and guilt and has a participatory function, through the work of the Holy Spirit, to affect holiness in the life of the believer. These aspects of the atonement are seen in his sermons, New Testament Notes, and the hymns he selected.

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One of the most contentious points of conflict in the United Methodist Church between liberals and conservatives has been the atonement. For conservatives, it is the essential center of the Gospel. Any attempt to remove or diminish the centrality of substitutionary atonement is an attack on the very core of Christian identity and is grounds for “amicable separation” or heresy charges. For liberals, the criticism of substitutionary atonement is twofold. Because it is usually abstracted from the life and teachings of Jesus, the atonement can lead to apathy toward those who are suffering today. Because it is a part of a patriarchal worldview, the atonement can sanction abuse.

The conservatives are right to claim that the atonement is at the core of our doctrinal standards. While the Church never designated one particular theory of the atonement to be the official standard, it always claimed that the cross is an essential part of the Gospel. Yet, liberals are correct when they point out the abuses of the cross and the various ways it has been misinterpreted to sanction abuse and excuse apathy. Because Wesley provides us with doctrinal standards and because he too wrestles with the practical application of theology, his understanding of the atonement is an essential guide for this contemporary debate.

What is Wesley’s understanding of the atonement? Even though he believes that it is the foundation for the *ordo salutis*, he never develops a comprehensive statement on it, nor did he publish a treatise or sermon exclusively on the subject. Wesley avoids the speculative debates over atonement theories because his primary concern is the creation of a theology to support his evangelistic movement.1 The best way to understand his “theory” of the atonement is to examine the way he used it, the way it functions in his theology.

While there is no systematic treatment of the topic, it permeates his work animating the *ordo salutis*. He combines substitutionary and participatory themes of the atonement to describe how the grace of Jesus Christ takes us from sin to holiness. The combination of these two themes makes his use of the atonement relevant for our contemporary debate.

**Wesley’s Use of Substitutionary Atonement**

Wesley is squarely in the tradition of substitutionary atonement. While there are references to Christus Victor, they do not play a central role in his
understanding of the atonement. Maddox notes that there are few military or ransom images in his references to the atonement, which is surprising given that the *Book of Common Prayer*, from which Wesley often quotes, contains ample references to ransom. According to Lindstrom, the theme of the atonement as an act of deliverance is “implicit rather than explicit and found chiefly in the earlier sermons.” At best, he links victory over Satan with penal substitution. For example, in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* on Colossians 1:14 he writes, “the voluntary passion of our Lord appeased the Father’s wrath, obtained pardon and acceptance for us, and, consequently, dissolved the dominion and power which Satan had over us through our sins.” Instead, Wesley posits victory over sin in the themes of regeneration and sanctification. In “The End of Christ’s Coming” Wesley explains one of his favorite verses, I John 3:8 (“For this purpose was the Son of God manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil”). He describes how Christ destroys the works of the devil not with cosmic warfare but with an illumination of the heart. “It is by thus manifesting himself in our hearts that he effectually ‘destroys the works of the devil’ ”. There is clearly victory imagery but the action occurs in a different place—the human heart rather than in the cosmos—from the traditional models of Christus Victor. He “personalizes” Christus Victor while making this imagery one part of the framework of substitutionary atonement.

In even fewer places there are allusions to the moral influence model. It is in Charles’ hymns John used, such as “Sinners, Turn, Why Will You Die” and “And Can It be That I Should Gain.” These hymns reflect the Augustinian doctrine of illumination in which the believer sees in the cross the supreme example of God’s love while simultaneously exposing one’s guilt. For Wesley, this example of love was expressed as the pardon that penal substitution secures.

Why didn’t he make greater use of the Christus Victor and moral influence traditions? Wesley’s main concern was the activation of the believer for the life of holiness. This is the theme that runs throughout his early and late works, and his embrace of a Reformation understanding of justification must be seen in this light of this deeper pursuit. As Long suggests, Wesley is best seen as a moral theologian for whom our primary impediment is guilt. The atonement’s primary function is the removal of guilt so that we can become holy, and substitutionary atonement is the best interpretation of the cross for this purpose. One must see his use of the cross in light of his orientation as a moral theologian; this enables us to see his challenge and relevance for today.

Wesley’s view of the atonement as penal substitution comes from the Reformation Anglicanism of the Edwardian Homilies and the *Book of Common Prayer*. From these he claims that the death of Christ is “a full, perfect and
sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction.”8 It is a full and perfect sacrifice in that it does not require additional work on our part. It is a sufficient sacrifice in contrast to the image of the Catholic mass as a sacrifice. It is oblation in that it cost God something and it is satisfaction because it is propitiation for our sins.

Soon after his Aldersgate experience he preached “Justification by Faith,” a landmark sermon because it is the first, full articulation of his soteriology. In this sermon and in his notes on Romans, Wesley sees Christ as a “second general parent and representative of the whole human race.” As such, Christ is the Second Adam who has “tasted death for every man” (quoting Hebrews 2:9). As our representative, Christ satisfied the just requirement that we be punished for sin. The net effect is that God will not punish us; we are put in good standing with God, and our dead souls are restored to eternal life. The “propitiation made by the blood of his Son” is the supreme expression of the righteous mercy of God.9

The cross is propitiation because the divine justice done to Christ is the divine mercy shown to us. In his Notes on Romans 3:25-27, Wesley affirms the necessity of punishment for sin as an integral part of justice, but justice is an intrinsic part of God’s nature as Holy Love. God’s righteousness is revealed not only in the act of forgiveness but also in the fulfilling of “that vindictive justice whose essential character and principal office is, to punish sin.” And so, justice is served by punishing the Son for our sins, and this is at the same time the expression of God’s mercy for anyone who trusts in Jesus. God’s mercy and justice are not at odds with each other in the atonement. “The attribute of justice must be preserved inviolate; and inviolate it is preserved, if there was a real infliction of punishment on our Saviour. On this plan all the attributes harmonize; every attribute is glorified, and not one superseded no, nor so much as clouded.” If the aim of the Atonement is the removal of guilt, then Christ’s acceptance of undeserved punishment is the supreme expression of divine love. For Wesley, the motive and aim of the cross always gravitates toward love because he understands that love is a more powerful animator than guilt.

These fragmentary statements of penal substitution stand in contrast to other theories of the atonement in Wesley’s day. There are no references or allusions to Anselm’s divine satisfaction. For Wesley, the restoration of God’s honor is not at stake. Even though Wesley vigorously defended Arminianism, he never articulated the Governmental Theory of Grotius. He certainly did not embrace the Commercialist Theory of the hypercalvinism of John Owen because of its implications favoring limited atonement. According to Clifford, “Wesley’s theology owes more to Reformation Anglicanism than to any other source. ...Like Wesley, Calvin paid little or no attention to Anselm. ...John Wesley is closest to Calvin.”10 In their varied ways, these other interpretations
cannot support his understanding of grace as the moral force which is free and empowering to all who long to “flee from the wrath to come” and are “seeking the power of godliness.”

Wesley places more emphasis on the imagery of sacrifice than on the forensic dimensions. As Gunton has demonstrated, even though they overlap, there is a contrast between the metaphors of justice and sacrifice. For example, in “Justification by Faith” he relies heavily on Isaiah 53 but does very little with the metaphors of indebtedness or indictment. The sacrificial imagery may be more useful in his desire to create a “practical divinity” whereas the forensic metaphor may tend to divert attention toward metaphysical speculations that reinforce a passive trust in an acquittal that took place beyond time and space. It is the remembrance and (as is explained below) the present experience of the atonement which is the dynamic engine of his _ordo salutis_. Sacrificial imagery lends itself to this kind of active faith better than juridical metaphors.

The accent mark is placed on the sacrifice in the hymns he selected. In his _Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists_ there is no separate section on the atonement “because [it] underlie[s] every section.” There are several hymns which express the personal application of substitutionary atonement. For example, hymn 281 says, “I feel my pardon sealed in blood/Savior, thy love I wait to feel.” And hymn 206 echoes the intimacy of the sacrifice, “Who hath done the direful deed/Hath crucified my God?...I have sold my Saviour;I/Have nailed him to the tree.” Again, it is the metaphor of sacrifice, more than the metaphor of the courtroom, that lends itself to personal application in hymn 355, “Pardon was written on my heart/In largest characters of blood.”

The driving force behind his embrace of penal substitution is the centrality of the doctrine of justification. Substitutionary atonement makes justification possible because we are pardoned by virtue of “the merits of Christ’s death and Passion” and faith is the “way of obtaining a share in his merit.” Without the atonement as the objective foundation, our justification is either an illusion or relies upon our own merits. For Wesley, substitutionary atonement reveals that there is nothing we can do to earn our salvation. His embrace of penal substitution reflects the primacy of grace in his theology and is the back story for his _ordo salutis_.

All of this sprang from a deeply personal crisis of faith that culminated in his Aldersgate experience. Prior to Aldersgate, Wesley had made an ardent attempt to practice the asceticism of William Law and others. He failed miserably. He came to an awareness that holiness could not be achieved through his sincere piety. Indeed, the more one tried the more one failed. It created a frustrating paralysis in his faith. It was the doctrine of justification, which he learned from the Moravians, which saved him from this crisis. Even
though his lifelong concern was holiness and he always preserved human agency in his *ordo salutis*, he realized that it can only be initiated by God. The cross is the supreme expression of God taking the first step to reanimate human beings so that they can progress on toward holiness.

William Law’s understanding of atonement is based on the notion that sanctification precedes justification as a necessary precondition. The crucifixion is not vicarious suffering for our sins, but a representational act of sacrifice to make our acts of mortification acceptable to God. Thus, salvation is dependent upon both Christ’s suffering and our mortification; we must practice self-denial (i.e. “the way of the cross”) in order to benefit from Christ’s atonement. According to “Law’s fundamentally mystical position ... Christ’s death did not constitute any satisfaction to God, but was only a means to the transformation of man and a demonstration of Christ’s superiority to the world, death, Hell, and the Devil.” The death of Christ is substitutionary in the sense that it was the only way for God to overcome evil.

In the days leading up to his Aldersgate experience there was an exchange of letters between Wesley and Law in which Wesley criticized his mentor for not sharing with him the true meaning of the atonement. Wesley criticized Law’s asceticism as “too high for man” and “bringing us into deeper captivity to the law of sin” and for never grounding his advice “upon faith in his blood.” Law replied, “If you are for separating the doctrine of the cross from following Christ, or faith in him, you have number and names enough on your side, but not me.” In the final letter, Wesley remarked on Law’s two maxims of the Lord (1. “Without me ye can do nothing,” and 2. “If any man will come after me, or be my disciple, let him take up his cross and follow me”) saying that they “may imply but do not express that...He is our propitiation, through faith in his blood.”

Underneath their falling out over atonement were two different understandings of the relationship between justification and sanctification. Because Wesley insists that we cannot achieve our justification through our works, the atonement must be the central event that secures our salvation. Because Law implies that sanctification is the precursor to justification, the cross plays a different role other than propitiation.

The letters must be read in context. Wesley may not be a reliable interpreter of Law for us, but the letters do express his dire situation to find a sufficient foundation for his quest for holy living. For Wesley, we do not and cannot initiate the process of holy living. He carried this belief throughout his life. It can only begin with and can only be sustained by our pardon from sin through faith in God’s initiative on the cross. “It is through his merits alone,” Wesley writes near the end of his life, “that all believers are saved, this is, justified, saved from guilt, sanctified, saved from the nature of sin, and glorified, taken into heaven.” Anything less leads to utter futility.
Yet, Wesley also sees the limits of substitutionary atonement. It is essential, but if taken too far it has dire consequences for the pursuit of holiness. He criticizes Calvinists for interpreting the righteousness of Christ in a way that leads to antinomianism. In turn, Calvinists, such as Rowland Hill and James Hervey, criticize Wesley for putting too much emphasis on human works and diminishing the grace of God.22

For Wesley, the problem with the Calvinists is that they extend the righteousness of Christ as a substitute for the believer's active growth in holiness. They support what has been called “substitutionary justification.” In order to avoid the implication that we are saved by our works, this view emphasizes Christ's passive and active obedience. His passive obedience (“righteousness”) was his suffering the punishment for our sins; his active obedience (“righteousness”) was his fulfillment of the law. Christ is our substitute for the punishment we deserve, which is accomplished by his passive righteousness, and for the fulfillment of the law, which is accomplished by his active righteousness.23

In “The Lord Our Righteousness,” Wesley counters the criticism that he is a “Jesuit in disguise.”24 In agreement with Hervey and other Calvinists, Wesley affirms that it is the righteousness of Christ imputed to us that pardons us. Echoing the Anglican tradition, he rejects the false distinction they made between the passive and active righteousness of Christ because “the righteousness of Christ, both his active and passive righteousness, is the meritorious cause of our justification [II.9].”

Wesley limits the satisfaction of the righteous expressed in the atonement to mean “neither more nor less than justification.”25 The righteousness of Christ (be it “active” or “passive”) does not fulfill—“satisfy”—the requirements of the law for us, which would make us exempt from having to obey the law. Instead, the righteousness of Christ must also be implanted in us after the pardon has been given—“imputed”—to us. Regarding this implanted righteousness of Christ, Wesley believes in it but “in its proper place; not as the ground of our acceptance with God, but as the fruit of it; not in the place of imputed righteousness, but as the consequent upon it. That is, I believe God implants righteousness in every one to whom he has imputed it.”26

The active obedience of Christ does not figure into Wesley’s view of atonement because the cross is not the fulfillment of the law. “Christ was a substitute only in suffering punishment, not in His fulfilling of the law.”27 He rejects the imputation of Christ’s active righteousness to believers because it removes the motivation to seek Christian perfection and with it the moral activism in the ordo salutis. It was “undercutting the place for responsible Christian growth in response to God’s grace.”28
Wesley’s Use of Participatory Atonement

Wesley has a paradox. One the one hand, he maintains the exclusive primacy of God’s grace to save us, as expressed in penal substitution. On the other hand, he contends that human agency is an essential element in the pursuit of holiness. How does he maintain the centrality of the cross without creating antinomianism or salvation by works? How does he avoid both the futility of Law’s mysticism and the passivity of Hervey’s Calvinism? He must go beyond despair and self-righteousness.

The answer is “participatory atonement.” By “participatory” I am borrowing from the work of Morna Hooker who demonstrates that Paul’s understanding of the cross was an act of solidarity with humanity that creates the way for human beings to enter into solidarity with Christ’s death and resurrection which creates new life. “Christ died, not instead of the human race, but as their representative; in some mysterious sense, the whole of humanity died on Calvary. ..He dies for us; but that means that we die with him.”29 We see this in key passages, such as Romans 6 and Galatians 2:19-20. Instead of Christ being a substitute that replaces human responsibility, the cross is literally our way to die with Christ and to be reborn in Christ.

Wesley combines participatory and substitutionary dimensions of the atonement in order to hold together this paradox of God’s grace and human agency. The substitutionary aspects are more apparent, but the participatory elements are saturated throughout his works. It is the synthesis of these two functions of the atonement that enable Wesley to avoid the problems of Law and Hervey, of despair and passivity.

We hear participatory atonement throughout the hymns he selected for the Methodist movement. There are a number of Charles’ hymns that urge the believer to participate in the atonement in order to personally appropriate the salvific benefits of substitutionary atonement. For example, under the section “Describing the Goodness of God,” hymn 24 is an excellent example of the participatory nature of the atonement. Verse one calls our attention to “the Man of griefs condemned for you” and then verses two through seven recreate the Passion story and end with the question, “Where is the King of glory now?....Th’Almighty faints beneath his load.” Then, verses eight through 15 bring the atonement into the heart of the believer beginning with an answer to the question in verse seven, “Beneath my load he faints and dies.” The believer longs to experience the crucifixion in order to experience the new birth. Verse nine says, “Help me to catch thy precious blood/Help me to taste thy dying love.” Verses 10 and 11 describe a participatory atonement:

“Give me to feel thy agonies,
One drop of thy sad cup afford!
I fain with thee would sympathize,
And share the sufferings of my Lord.
The earth could to her centre quake,
Convulsed, while her Creator died;
O let my inmost nature shake,
And die with Jesus crucified!"\(^{30}\)

The entirety of hymn 352 is a plea to die with Christ:

"Now, Jesus, let thy powerful death
Into my being come,
Slay the old Adam with thy breath,
The man of sin consume. ...
My old affections mortify,
Nail to the cross my will,
Daily and hourly bid me die,
Or altogether kill. ...
O let it now make haste to die,
The mortal wound receive!
So shall I live; and yet not I,
But Christ in me shall live."\(^{31}\)

Under the heading "For the Society, Praying," hymn 505 describes the role of participatory atonement in the creation of Christian fellowship. "Witnesses that Christ hath died," Charles writes, "we with him are crucified."\(^{32}\)

One can see the connection between spiritual illumination and participatory atonement in hymn 118:

"Vouchsafe us eyes of faith to see
The Man transfixed on Calvary,
To know thee, who thou art—
The one eternal God and true;
And let the sight affect, subdue,
And break my stubborn heart. ...
The unbelieving veil remove,
And by thy manifested love,
And by thy sprinkled blood,
Destroy the love of sin in me,
And get thyself the victory,
And bring me back to God. ...
Now let thy dying love constrain
My soul to love its God again,
Its God to glorify;
And lo! I come thy cross to share,
Echo thy sacrificial prayer,
And with my Saviour die."\(^{33}\)
Influenced by the tradition of the Patristics, the atonement is woven into the larger theme of illumination in order to explain how one’s faith is awakened to salvation. It has similarities with the moral influence motif, but goes beyond it by drawing the believer into the image of the crucifixion in order to experience its transforming effects.

The theme of participatory atonement is also reflected in the widespread use of Galatians 2:20 in the hymns. There are 22 hymns that refer directly to or make allusions to this verse, making it the most frequently used Bible verse in the hymnal.

Participatory atonement not only appears in Charles’ hymns but also in the hymns that John translated and wrote. John translated several German hymns from Herrnhut which contain imagery of the believer personally experiencing the crucifixion. Hymn 25 expresses the desire for participatory atonement that we “thirst, thou wounded Lamb of God...To dwell within thy wounds” because we are “blest...who still abide/close sheltered in thy bleeding side!” John’s translation of a Paul Gerhardt hymn reiterates a popular image for John: “Thy wounds upon my heart impress.” Even though he criticized mystical pietists like Gerhard Tersteegen as “the most dangerous of all [Christianity’s] enemies,” he still used one of his hymns that expresses participatory atonement:

“O hide this self from me, that I
No more, but Christ in me may live!
My vile affections crucify,
Nor let one darling lust survive.
In all things nothing may I see,
Nothing desire or seek but thee.”

Among the hymns that John probably wrote himself, the imagery of participatory atonement appears. He associates it with the conversion experience. Under the heading, “Groaning for Full Redemption,” John begins hymn 341 with references to substitutionary atonement and then moves to a participatory emphasis. The first verse invites us to trust in the atonement:

“Come, and my hallowed heart inspire
Sprinkled with the atoning blood
Now to my soul thyself reveal
Thy mighty work let me feel
And know that I am born of God.”

But the verse ends on a note of desire for coinherence:

“Be Christ in me, and I in him,
Till perfect we are made in one.”
By the third verse, the participatory nature of atonement is made explicit:

“Let earth no more my heart divide;  
With Christ may I be crucified,  
To thee with my whole soul aspire;  
Dead to the world and all its toys,  
Its idle pomp, and fading joys,  
Be thou alone my one desire.”

The interplay between substitutionary and participatory themes is seen in Wesley’s commentary on Romans 5 and 6 in his Notes. When Romans 5 says that Christ died to sin, for Wesley, this was “to atone for and abolish it” and that the former is accomplished by the penal substitution of Christ and the latter is accomplished by the Holy Spirit makes relevant the cross through a near-mystical asceticism. In his note on Romans 5:6, he declares that the cross is more than an example to inspire love and devotion. Christ’s death is “not only to set them a pattern, or to procure them power to follow it” but first and foremost, it rescues us from sin by dying for us.

But when discussing the baptismal imagery of chapter six, he introduces the Holy Spirit to make the Atonement a reality in the life of the believer. “In baptism we, through faith, are ingrafted into Christ; and we draw new spiritual life from this new root, through his Spirit, who fashions us like unto him, and particularly with regard to his death and resurrection.” The sinful self is “crucified with Christ, mortified, gradually killed, by virtue of our union with him.” Here we see the introduction of the asceticism of his early days, which he had learned from Law, a’Kempis and others. The end result is “complete victory over [sin] to every one who is under the powerful influences of the Spirit of Christ.” He describes our experience of the Holy Spirit as melted metal being cast in a mould. The mould is the cross, and the agent using the mould is the Spirit.

In his sermons, participatory atonement functions in the awakening of the “spiritual sense.” “Wesley turns the whole drama [of the atonement] into an event of communication in which humanity is the intended recipient of divine love which in Christ come to expression” through the inner working of the Holy Spirit. The new birth is marked by an activation of our “spiritual senses,” which have atrophied because of sin. In order to activate the senses the heart is illuminated by the cross and the sin in one’s heart is crucified.

He uses participatory atonement language to describe the effect of justification on new believers:

“Now the Word of God plainly declares that even those who are justified, who are born again in the lowest sense, do not ‘continue in sin’; that they cannot ‘live any longer therein’; that they are ‘planted together in the likeness of the death of Christ’; that their ‘old man is crucified with him, the body of
sin being destroyed, so that thenceforth they do not serve sin'; that ‘being dead with Christ, they are freed from sin’; that they are ‘dead unto sin’, and ‘alive unto God’; that ‘sin hath not dominion over them’, who are ‘not under the law, but under grace’; but that these, ‘being made free from sin, are becoming the servants of righteousness.”

By linking justification with participatory atonement themes, Wesley sets the stage for demonstrating the connection between justification and Christian perfection. Justification is the proleptic anticipation of its full maturing into perfection, and participatory atonement is the engine that drives this process.

Participatory atonement also helps Wesley describe the ongoing process of sanctification. In “The Law Established Through Faith, II” he describes how the law is established in our hearts by faith. “While we steadily look, not at the things which are seen, but at those which are not seen, we are more and more crucified to the world and the world crucified to us.” This imagery is linked with the activation of the believer’s ability to fulfill the law because “by faith...we establish his law in our own hearts in a still more effectual manner. For there is no motive which so powerfully inclines us to love God as the sense of the love of God in Christ.” Shades of Abelard, but unlike Abelard, Wesley’s religious affections explain how the love of God as expressed in the atonement is more than the example of a martyr and how it becomes effective in the heart of the believer. To do this, he evokes the inner experience of being crucified with Christ from Galatians 6:14.

Given his abiding interest in holiness and good works, it seems ironic that Wesley does not follow Abelard or rely upon examples of Jesus’ life as a role model. Yet, Wesley’s view of sin demands that the believer become activated (the imago dei is reactivated) for good works by something that can operate on a deeper level. Experiencing the atonement in one’s heart frees human agency from the power of sin and perpetually empowers us for the pursuit of holiness. For Wesley, Christ is an ineffective role model unless the Spirit of Christ can first crucify sin in us so that we can quite literally allow that role model to be embodied in us.

Another key passage expressing participatory atonement plays a key role in his description of Christian perfection. In “Christian Perfection” he quotes Romans 6 extensively to describe the character of a “real Christian.” Experiencing the crucifixion in one’s heart begins in the experience of regeneration and justification—of those “who are born again in the lowest sense.” Then later in the sermon as he explains the process of perfection, he utilizes Galatians 2:20 to explain how “evil tempers” are removed from the believer.

In “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion” Wesley states that Christian perfection “does imply the being so crucified with Christ as to be able to testify, ‘I live not, but Christ liveth in me.’”
Throughout the *ordo salutis* the theme of participatory atonement helps ground the experience of the believer in substitutionary atonement and enables the atonement to become relevant and effective in the individual. It becomes the dynamic that enables Wesley to combine elements of Christus Victor and moral influence into his substitutionary framework.49

The substitutionary and participatory elements of the atonement come together in his understanding of the Lord’s Supper. In keeping with the Calvinist influences on his Anglican tradition, Wesley affirms “Real Presence.” However, Wesley merges the memorial and sacrificial aspects from the Anglo-Catholic tradition with the Real Presence. The sacrament sets before our eyes Christ’s death and suffering whereby we are transported into an experience of the crucifixion. This is an activity of the Holy Spirit which can only be entered into by faith. The purpose of which is to impress on us that it is our sins crucifying Jesus, in keeping with the pragmatic goals of his theology. This is clearly seen in many of the Wesleyan Eucharistic hymns, such as this one:

“Heart of Stone, relent, relent,  
Break by Jesus’ Cross subdued,  
See his body mangled, rent,  
Cover’d with a gore of blood!  
Sinful Soul, what hast thou done?  
Murder’d God’s eternal Son.”50

The Eucharist becomes a means of grace in which we are invited to experience participatory atonement which is effective because the sacrament’s point of reference is the substitutionary atonement. We see in it the offering of God in Christ, and in turn, it is the opportunity for us to offer the sacrifice of ourselves to God, thus, the evangelistic dimension of the Lord’s Supper.51

**Conclusion**

Penal substitution is the primary meaning of the atonement for Wesley. Substitutionary atonement provides the foundation for justification and is the objective point of reference of God initiating our salvation, without which we do not have the power to save ourselves. Yet, Wesley limits the scope of substitutionary atonement in order to preserve human agency (and responsibility) in the pursuit of holiness and thus avoid the problem of passivity.

Human agency in the pursuit of Christian perfection is made possible by participatory atonement. Participatory dimensions of the atonement make the substitutionary dimension effective in the life of the believer. Participatory atonement is the way we experience the Holy Spirit transforming our lives in the process of regeneration and sanctification.

What does this say to the contemporary debate? It does not answer the
criticism of abuse, which goes beyond the scope of this paper. But it does remind liberals that substitutionary atonement need not lead to passivity when it is a part of a fuller understanding of the cross. Wesley rightly understands that guilt is a bad motivator, both in its political as well as pietistic forms. His great insight is that in order for divine love to inspire and sustain our activism it must uproot sin in our hearts through the cross. In order for the believer to become, quite literally, an activist, one must be freed from the personal and social sins that incapacitate us. This requires a substitute—a proxy, a representative—to do what we are incapable of doing on our own, which is to destroy the power of sin over our lives.

It reminds conservatives that we need a way to participate in the atonement in order for the doctrine to become real and relevant. When you leave the atonement on a metaphysical level it becomes too abstract and arcane and thus leaves it open for misuse. Substitutionary atonement does not let us off the hook by offering us “cheap grace,” but instead Christ invites us to die with him in order to be raised to new life in him.

Notes


6. See also hymn 145.6-7 and hymn 160. 7 in “A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists,” Works, Franz Hildebrandt, Oliver A. Beckerlegge, with James Dale, editors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) vol. 7, pgs. 251, 282. Maddox claims there is more affinity between Abelard and Wesley than is usually acknowledged, even though Wesley would reject the basic premises of Abelard’s argument, p. 106. Like the Christus Victor themes, elements of moral influence are taken up in the personal application of substitutionary atonement.


9. I.7-8, II.5, Works (Outler) vol. 1, pgs.


12. The Works of John Wesley, vol. 7, Franz Hildebrandt, Oliver A. Beckerlegge,

13. Ibid., verse 5, p. 431.


15. Ibid., verse 2, p. 523. Other examples include hymns 173.6; 183.6 and 8; 244 and 193 (“And Can It Be That I Should Gain”).


17. Lindstrom, p. 68.


22. Maddox, p. 103.


26. Lindstrom, p. 73.

27. Maddox, p. 104.


30. Ibid., p. 519-20.

31. Ibid., p. 696.

32. Ibid., p. 228-29.

33. The only other scripture passage with as many references in the hymns is Ezekiel 11:19—“I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh,” Ibid., p. 828. For additional examples of participatory atonement in Charles Wesley’s hymns see hymn 23, verse 9; hymn 348.

34. Ibid., p. 111-12.

35. Ibid., p. 531.

36. Ibid., p. 493. The reference to Tersteegen’s mysticism comes from a letter dated January 25, 1738.

37. According to Beckerlegge this includes hymns 96, 170, 282, 328, 341, 368, 264, Ibid., p. 38.

38. Ibid., p. 593.

39. Romans 6:3, 6, 14.


42. Sermon 36, II.2, Works (Outler) vol. 2, p. 39.

43. Sermon 36, III.3, Ibid., pp. 41-2.


45. Ibid., II.3.

46. Ibid. , II.25, p. 118.


48. “One is tempted to describe this as a Penalty Satisfaction explanation of the Atonement which has a moral Influence purpose, and a Ransom effect” Randy Maddox, Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), p. 109.
