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# CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT

by

JOY E. SPANN

Under the Direction of Dr. Monique Moultrie

## ABSTRACT

In the Civil Rights era there was a resistance from some White Southern Evangelicals to push for equality for African Americans. This response is often attributed to racist attitudes towards African Americans within the Evangelical and Fundamentalist communities. Although racist attitudes are a definite motivating factor, I believe there is a larger theological argument that also needs to be examined- the internalization of atonement theology and what that meant for the understanding of suffering and sacrifice experienced by African Americans. I will also examine the ways in which atonement theology, specifically the penal substitution and Christus Victor models, influenced Martin Luther King, Jr.'s methods in the fight for Civil Rights as well as the response of Noel Smith, a white fundamentalist preacher, to the movement. In my conclusion, I will discuss the ways atonement theology continues to influence the interpretations and responses of these groups to Civil Rights issues.

INDEX WORDS: Evangelical, Fundamentalist, Atonement, nonviolence, sacrifice, civil rights

CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT

by

JOY E. SPANN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

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Joy Elois Spann

2016

CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT

by

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December 2016

## DEDICATION

This thesis work is dedicated to my parents, Rev. Brian A. Spann, Sr. and Laurie Spann. Daddy, you are no longer with us, but your spirit has been a constant presence in my life. You inspired my interest in religion and encouraged me to seek out answers for myself through research. Mom, you supported me throughout this project, pushing me to finish when I felt hopeless and proofreading at 1am, when I rushed to make a submission deadline. I am also grateful for Dr. Molly Bassett, who encouraged me to apply for this graduate program and never wavered in her support for me as a student. To my boyfriend, Christopher Binford, I appreciate the emotional support you gave me throughout this entire process. You were encouraging and you would never let me doubt myself. To my friend, Dominique Smith, thank you so much for the advice and encouragement. All of you have encouraged, supported, and tolerated me during a very emotional and difficult time. Thank you all for everything.

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Dr. Louis Ruprecht, I wanted you on my committee because I knew you would challenge me and provided another much needed perspective. I appreciate your advice and willingness to see this project through as it continued to evolve.

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## INTRODUCTION

I wanted to present a project that analyzed two things I think about a lot: race and Christianity. I grew up in a Christian home and my dad was an AME pastor. AME is African Methodist Episcopal Church and because of the distinct history of the AME church, my racial identity was tied into my religious identity as a Christian. Despite growing up in a black church, my parents were conservative Christians and most of the media I was allowed to consume as a child was from the Christian mainstream. I didn't notice it at first, but by the time I was a teen I realized the distinct whiteness of the Christian mainstream media I had access to: magazines, movies, radio shows, music and how it contrasted with the blackness of my actual church experience. When I joined the religious studies department here at Georgia State, I found myself thinking a lot about white culture as default and black culture as "other" and what a major force that was in Christianity.<sup>1</sup> I also was highly impacted by the Black Lives Matter movement and the mainstream Christian media's response to it. Initially my project started to develop in a different direction, but through meetings with my thesis committee, I realized that what I had in mind was too large for a master's thesis and way too broad for me to tackle. After meeting with Dr. Esaki, he lent me a book called *Saving Paradise*, and the huge debate of atonement theology was revealed to me.<sup>2</sup> I had no idea there were so many theories about atonement theology.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> When I say "white as default," I mean that white culture is perceived as normal or regular and everything else is perceived as "different," "ethnic," or "other."

<sup>2</sup> Written by Rita N. Brock and Rebecca A. Parker.

<sup>3</sup> Namely, the Ransom theory, the Recapitulation theory, the Satisfaction theory, the Penal Substitution theory, the Moral Example or Influence Theory, the Governmental theory, the Declaratory theory, the Guaranty theory, the Vicarious Repentance theory, the Christus Victor or Dramatic theory, the Accident theory, and the Martyr theory, theories which are all too vast to explore in greater detail in my thesis.

Through my research of these theories, I realized that I had learned some meshed up version of most of these theories in church.

In their book, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker suggest that the traditional Christian belief that the pain and suffering of Jesus Christ was a necessary event in order to atone for the presence of original sin has been internalized by Christians and consequently affects their interpretation of universal suffering as both necessary and salutary. They suggest that this interpretation of atonement can be dangerous.<sup>4</sup> They examine the experiences of victims of abuse and the reluctance of these victims to leave abusive situations because they view the abuse as their own cross to bear. They highlight examples of this interpretation being reinforced via spiritual leaders that discourage the victims from leaving abusive relationships in the interest of preserving their family life and emulating Jesus Christ. I saw a parallel between the suffering experienced by abused women mentioned by Parker and Brock and the oppressive suffering of African Americans. Both groups at some time in their life will be perceived as being responsible for their own abuse/oppression either by themselves or others. The idea of suffering being redemptive or necessary is implicitly a part of American Christian culture and exploring that concept appealed to me. This made me wonder if the internalization of a particular model of atonement theology could influence one's approach to the fight for racial equality.

I thought Dr. King was the perfect person to represent the African American community during civil rights and I came across Noel Smith after reading articles about Southern Fundamentalists. After I discovered Smith's periodical, *The Bible Baptist Tribune*,

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<sup>4</sup> Rita N. Brock and Rebecca A. Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

I realized that he had a lot of articles about civil rights, King, and salvation, which made him a great resource for the white fundamentalist perspective. The more I researched, the more obvious the themes appeared to me. The Civil Rights movement was about changing laws in order to change behavior and stop mistreatment. The opposition felt the movement was disruptive and unnecessary. I felt that Cultural Hegemony was the missing link that tied everything together. Cultural Hegemony created an avenue for me to explore the history, religion, and laws that formed a segregated society. The penal substitution model and the Christus Victor model of atonement represented for me two sides of the segregation argument.

First, I want to address the long and complicated history of atonement theory. As I mentioned before, there are tons of theories and interpretations of the purpose and meaning of atonement. What appears to be a straightforward concept---crucifixion of Christ equals forgiveness for humankind---is complicated by the possible interpretations of the implementation of said concept. There are various models of atonement theology and the bulk of research analyzing these models is extensive. For the purpose of this paper, I chose to focus on the Substitutionary Atonement Theory. The Substitutionary Atonement Theory is a merging of theories credited to various theologians and church fathers over time. The overview I present here will be my attempt to narrow down the cultural and religious significance of the development of these theories.

Anselm of Canterbury is credited with the development of the Satisfaction Theory. Anselm's theory came out of a response to the culture he lived in and the prominent atonement theory at the time, the Ransom Theory.<sup>5</sup> Anselm stated "The devil and man

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<sup>5</sup> Ransom Theory states that Jesus was paid as a ransom to Satan.

belong to God alone, and neither one stands outside of God's power, what case, then, did God have to plead with his own creature, in his own affair?"<sup>6</sup> Anselm instead presented his own theory, it said that we owe everything to God, but when we sin, we fail to acknowledge everything God has done for us and begin to accrue a debt we are not equipped to repay. This theory presents atonement as a transaction between God and man. God loved us so much that he sent his son, Jesus, to repay the debt so that we could be reconciled to God.<sup>7</sup> Some scholars believe that Anselm's theory was influenced by "medieval feudalism." Medieval feudalism was a system in the Middle Ages in which poor people pledged themselves to noblemen in exchange for protection. They would often work the nobleman's land, pay him a high rent, and obey his every ruling for this protection. In Anselm's theory, God was a feudal lord and all of humankind were indebted to him. One of the most important things to a lord was his honor. Through our sinful behavior, humankind caused God dishonor.

Anyone who does not give this honour to God steals from God what belongs to him, and dishonours God, and this is sin. What is more, as long as he does not repay what he stole, he remains guilty. And it is not enough simply to repay what he stole. Because he insulted God, he must give back something more than what he took.<sup>8</sup>

In Anselm's world when someone was dishonored, especially a lord, a debt must be paid. The payment acceptable was determined by one's status in life. As serfs to a feudal lord, humankind was unworthy to pay the debt that they owed. Jesus paid that debt for humankind through the suffering he experienced on the cross. However, for many

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<sup>6</sup> Ben Pugh. *Atonement Theories: A Way Through the Maze*. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), chapt.3 , para. 13.

<sup>7</sup> William Placher, "An Alternative View of Atonement: How Does Jesus Save?" *Christian Century*, 126 no.11 (June 2, 2009): 23.

<sup>8</sup> Pugh, *Atonement Theories*, chap. 3, para. 17.

theologians, the satisfaction theory was an insufficient explanation of the atonement. From the Satisfaction theory, came the Penal Substitution model.

During the Reformation, many things about the church began to be questioned, and atonement was one of many things that underwent an interpretation transformation. When medieval feudalism died out, Teutonic political theory replaced it. There were now judges who enforced laws through punishment when laws were disobeyed. This transformed Anselm's metaphor of a feudal lord with serfs to God as a judge who seeks justice.<sup>9</sup> This change traces its roots to John Calvin and is a popular view for many evangelicals.

In 1931, Gustaf Aulén released a book entitled *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*. In this book, Aulén claimed that Anselm's response to the Ransom Theory was the result of the misinterpretation of the theory. In Anselm's view, the Ransom Theory was more like a business transaction, God hands over Jesus to Satan to be crucified on the cross, and now humankind is free from his evil clutches.<sup>10</sup> Aulén insists that Christ's time on the cross defeated Satan and resulted in a liberation of humanity from the slavery of sin.<sup>11</sup> Aulén traces the roots of the Ransom Theory to Irenaeus.<sup>12</sup> Aulén states that according to Irenaeus's view:

First, then, it must be emphasised that the work of atonement is regarded as carried through by God Himself; and this, not merely in the sense that God authorises, sanctions, and initiates the plan of salvation, but that He Himself is the effective agent in the redemptive work from beginning to end... Second, it is to be emphasised

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<sup>9</sup> Paul R. Eddy and James Beilby, "The atonement: An introduction," in *The nature of the atonement: Four views*, ed. Paul R. Eddy et al. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2006), loc 178. Kindle edition.

<sup>10</sup> Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 2003), 21.

<sup>11</sup> Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Irenaeus was an early church father and apologist. His writings are considered to be part of the body of work that builds early Christian theology.

that this view of the Atonement has regularly a dualistic background—namely, the reality of the forces of evil, which are hostile to the Divine will.<sup>13</sup>

In other words Aulén, did not believe the Ransom Theory was stating that Jesus was handed over to the devil so that humankind could be redeemed. Aulén felt that Irenaeus outlined a process in which God was involved in the redemption from the beginning to the end. Yes, Christ was a sacrifice, but his role was to defeat evil, not to simply serve as a substitute or payment. Christ was chosen has a necessary force, not just an alternative, which is how Aulén interpreted the Christus Victor model.

The Christus Victor model depicts Christ's death on the cross, not just as a solution to the problem of sin, but as victorious and triumphant. Christ's death is viewed as a victory in the battle against evil because Christ has defeated the sinful nature of humankind through his crucifixion and subsequent resurrection. The resurrection is a key component of this model because it highlights the fact that Christ won because he did not simply die, but presented a newness of life for all those who choose it.<sup>14</sup> Evil appears to be victorious when Christ was put on the cross, but God transformed this sacrifice into something amazing. Something as awful and violent as death is in turn used to atone for all of the terrible things humankind has done. Not only is Christ paying a debt, but he is also offering a gift to anyone who will receive it- the opportunity of eternal life after an earthly death. This is in contrast to the penal substitution model where the focus is on the necessity of the crucifixion itself and the substitutionary element of Christ as an alternative to humankind paying their own debts.

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<sup>13</sup> Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 34.

<sup>14</sup> Pugh, *Atonement Theories*, part 1, para. 2.

In the penal substitution model, the amount of sin committed by humankind has incurred the wrath of God. The sins of the world are piled on Christ's body as the necessary punishment to absolve the world of God's wrath. The focus is on the debt that Christ is paying and the punishment he incurs. God is disgusted by sin and as a righteous judge; he cannot let this sin continue unpunished. This model emphasizes the belief that sin requires punishment. God cannot be close to humankind until they pay their debt. That debt must be paid with blood and Christ is sacrificed as a result of this. If humankind had not been so evil, Christ would not have to pay this debt. Humankind is to blame, but Christ suffers for us. This suffering is emphasized in order to demonstrate the huge debt of sin and the blood sacrifice necessary to atone for it.

In examining these two theories of atonement within the Evangelical Christian community, it appears as though parallels could be drawn between racial attitudes in the 1950s and 1960s and one's choice of atonement theory. These theories of atonement act as a reflection of these Christians' view of the role of Jesus. Those resistant to the changing racial climate appeared to subscribe to the penal substitution model and a perception of Jesus as a sacrificial lamb who endured the punishment meant for humankind because he was obedient to God. Those pushing for desegregation and equal rights, appeared to subscribe to the Christus Victor model and a perception of Jesus as enduring suffering on the cross in order to defeat evil. In this thesis I will address what I perceive as connections between Civil Rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Christus Victor model and *Baptist Bible Tribune* founder Noel Smith and the penal substitution model.<sup>15</sup> I found the penalizing tone of Smith's words to be an endorsement of the necessity of suffering for

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<sup>15</sup> Fundamentalist newspaper founded by Noel Smith in 1950.

people that sinned against God. I found King's focus on redemptive suffering to hone in on the rewards we could all receive if we suffered unjustly.

Next, I want to make clear what I mean by "Evangelical fundamentalist." According to George Marsden, an evangelical is any Christian that affirms the five basic beliefs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelical consensus.<sup>16</sup> He states these essential beliefs must include

(1) the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of the Bible, (2) the real historical character of God's saving work recorded in Scripture, (3) salvation to eternal life based on the redemptive work of Christ, (4) the importance of evangelism and missions, and (5) the importance of a spiritually transformed life.<sup>17</sup>

Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. falls into this category, especially if we consider numbers 4 and 5 on the list. King brought the message of Jesus Christ everywhere he took his movement. King did not actively evangelize, but he used his calling to promote the mission of Civil Rights, incorporating the message of Jesus Christ into his speeches. His nonviolent demonstrations emphasized the necessity of a spiritually transformed life.

Evangelicalism is a large category that includes fundamentalists. Marsden defines a fundamentalist as

an evangelical who is militant in opposition to liberal theology in the churches or to changes in cultural values or mores, such as those associated with "secular humanism." In either the long or the short definitions, fundamentalists are a subtype of evangelicals and militancy is crucial to their outlook. Fundamentalists are not just religious conservatives, they are conservatives who are willing to take a stand and to fight.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> George Marsden is an historian that has published multiple works that focus primarily on interactions between Christianity and American culture. I am aware that there is a wealth of resources concerning Christianity and fundamentalism, but I found that a good number of sources often cited Marsden, which led me to using his definition in this paper.

<sup>17</sup> George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), Loc. 154, Kindle edition.

<sup>18</sup> Marsden, *Understanding*, Loc. 107.



In the 1960s fundamentalists began to disassociate themselves from what they considered to be the liberalism overtaking evangelicals and became largely separatists from the Baptist denomination.<sup>19</sup> I chose to use the term “evangelical fundamentalist” because I see an overlap between the category of “evangelical” and sub-category of “fundamentalist.” There are fundamentalist Christians that are complete separatists and believe that any interaction with a secular world is inappropriate through the eyes of God. However, there are also fundamentalists that have issues with secular society, but they seek to change this society. They are further right than evangelicals, but not as far right as most fundamentalists, thus I have decided to use the term “evangelical fundamentalist” to highlight that interaction. Through his critiques of liberal society in his periodical, Noel Smith falls into this category.<sup>20</sup>

Noel Smith serves as an appropriate contrast to King because he often wrote editorials admonishing King’s methods of seeking civil rights reform. Smith questioned King’s motives and brand of Christianity. Smith’s emphasis on the negative behaviors he associated with the African American community as bigger issues than their access to Civil Rights highlights his apparent lean towards the penal substitution model. Smith did not feel that African Americans were blameless in their plight and found their methods for seeking equality un-Christian. Smith saw Jesus above all as obedient to God and instructive to everyone else. I will explore this further in the penal substitution model chapter.

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<sup>19</sup> Marsden, *Understanding*, See also Bill J. Leonard, “A Theology for Racism: Southern Fundamentalists and the Civil Rights Movement,” *Baptist History And Heritage* 34 no. 1 (1999): 49-68.

<sup>20</sup> In the October 28, 1966 issue of the Baptist Bible Tribune Smith shares the reaffirmation of the Fundamental Baptist Congress’s Christian Faith. One of the articles stated: “We believe that Christ bore our sins in His own body on the tree, and died, having voluntarily offered Himself unto God as a vicarious, substitutionary sacrifice for us.”

I believe that King, on the other hand, embraced the Christus Victor model. King's nonviolent movement encouraged participants to nonviolently resist any attack or response to their demonstrations. This resulted in many, including King, sacrificing their health, safety, and lives for the greater good. One can draw parallels to the undeserving sacrifice and suffering that Jesus experienced on the cross to the experiences of those in the movement. The ways that King's strategies were influenced by atonement theology is worth examining. A larger question, also important to consider, is if this sacrifice was perceived as, "atonement"?

Finally, I want to address the role of Antonio Gramsci's theory of Cultural Hegemony in this thesis. The resistance to change is common for individuals that are satisfied with the current conditions of their society. The structure of society is often set up to meticulously withstand whatever comes its way. I use Gramsci's theory of Cultural Hegemony to examine the ways that the societal structure of the American south was conducive to the internalization of racist ideas. By examining the history of racial of discrimination in the United States and the enforcement of these beliefs through laws and religious interpretation, I will highlight the ways that particular interpretations of a theological concept can impact the way one interprets the world around them.

## CULTURAL HEGEMONY

Cultural hegemony is a term that describes Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci's theory surrounding the authority used by a ruling class to control the beliefs, perceptions, values, etc. of a culturally diverse society. Gramsci believed the United States to be divided into what he calls "four strata: the financial class, the political class, the Intelligentsia, the Common Man."<sup>21</sup> Gramsci believed that when the interests and power of the financial and political classes were combined they could be classified as the ruling class. According to Gramsci, the law is used to maintain and cultivate the society desired by the ruling class.<sup>22</sup> By examining the ways that laws, culture, and religion interacted in order to maintain a culture of white supremacy, one can see its impact on the evolution of Christianity in the American south and the understanding of Christian concepts, such as atonement theology. One can then understand how the internalization of said theology can impact the way one views society at large.

In Gramsci's view, the law serves as a means to shape the desired society of the ruling forces.

It operates according to a plan, urges, incites, solicits, and "punishes"; for, once the conditions are created in which a certain way of life is 'possible', then "criminal action or omission" must have a punitive sanction, with moral implications, and not merely be judged generically as "dangerous". The Law is the repressive and negative aspect of the entire positive, civilising activity undertaken by the State. The "prize-giving" activities of individuals and groups, etc., must also be incorporated in the conception of the Law; praiseworthy and meritorious activity is rewarded, just as

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<sup>21</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Antonio Gramsci Selections from Cultural Writings*, trans. William Boelhower, ed. David Forgacs et al. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), 280-281.

<sup>22</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, trans. & ed. Quentin Hoare et. Al. (London: Lawrence & Wishart transcribed by Elecbook, 1999), 508.  
<http://abahlali.org/files/gramsci.pdf>

criminal actions are punished (and punished in original ways, bringing in “public opinion” as a form of sanction).<sup>23</sup>

Essentially, the law is not enacted aimlessly. The lawmaker or lawmakers have some type of goal in mind. This includes, but is not limited to keeping order and maintaining order, punishing criminals, and cultivating a society desirable to those in control of said society. This is not unlike the penal substitution model that builds upon God as judge metaphor. If God is to be just and fair, sin cannot go unpunished. Justice depends on God punishing those who break his laws and sin against him. If a person commits a crime, he or she must pay the price. I believe that an argument can be made that in the early days of America, a desirable society was one ran by white men. Eventually justifications had to be made in order to secure the rule of white men in America, often resulting in beliefs of white supremacy. Evidence of the law being used this way in instances of white supremacy can be seen through the institution of slavery and in the “Jim Crow” laws of the south. Slavery and segregation were both legal institutions that perpetuated a culture of white supremacy.

Gramsci states:

If every State tends to create and maintain a certain type of civilisation and of citizen (and hence of collective life and of individual relations), and to eliminate certain customs and attitudes and to disseminate others, then the Law will be its instrument for this purpose (together with the school system, and other institutions and activities). It must be developed so that it is suitable for such a purpose—so that it is maximally effective and productive of positive results.<sup>24</sup>

Examples of this can be seen in the formation of racial classifications in the United States.

After African people were brought to the United States and enslaved, certain justifications had to be made in order to legitimize the system of slavery. One method of legitimizing the

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<sup>23</sup> Gramsci, *Selections*, 509.

<sup>24</sup> Gramsci, *Selections*, 508.

system of slavery consisted of dehumanizing the enslaved and creating a clear distinction between “whiteness” and “blackness.” In “A Servant of Servants He Shall Be: The Construction of Race in American Religious Mythologies,” Paul Harvey outlines the various ways this method of legitimization evolved over time.<sup>25</sup> Harvey discusses the way two popular biblical stories were reimagined in order to justify the system of slavery and elevated racial category of whiteness. In the biblical book of Genesis, “the Curse of Ham” is interpreted as Ham’s descendants being African people, and thus destined to live their lives under the heel of Japheth, believed to be the ancestor of white people.<sup>26</sup> Essentially, blacks are slaves because they are cursed due to the sin committed by their ancestor, Ham. Also in Genesis, the story of creation was reinterpreted to explain the dehumanization of African people. Sam Cartwright and an anonymous author that published his thoughts under the pseudonym “Caucasian” used the biblical story of creation to support their theory of *polygenesis*, or the separate creation of the races. They claimed that whites were the only descendants of Adam and Eve and that blacks and other races actually belonged to the animal kingdom, which God gave Adam and Eve dominion over. Caucasian took his theory further by claiming that Noah’s flood was caused by the evil of miscegenation because God did not approve of whites reproducing with “inferior” species.<sup>27</sup> Examining that very limited overview of racial classifications in the United States demonstrates evidence that a culture of white supremacy was created and maintained.

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Harvey, “A Servant of Servants He Shall Be: The Construction of Race in American Religious Mythologies,” in *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity: An Introduction*, ed. Craig R. Prentiss, (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 22-26.

<sup>26</sup> In the “Curse of Ham”, Ham finds his father, Noah, drunk and naked. Rather than help his father, Ham takes advantage of Noah and invites his brothers, Shem and Japheth to join him. They refuse and instead turn their heads and cover their father’s nakedness. Noah then curses Ham and proclaims that all his descendants are destined to be the servants of his brothers.

<sup>27</sup> Harvey, “A Servant, 22-26.

In addition to highlighting the ways white supremacist culture could be reflected in the interpretation of biblical texts, “The Curse of Ham,” “Noah’s Flood,” and “Adam and Eve” also emphasize a God that is wrathful and vengeful. This God is focused on punishment and retribution for the sins of the various characters in these stories. This God fits perfectly with the penal substitution model of atonement. The penal substitution model focuses on an understanding of the atonement that emphasizes God’s disgust with sin and the punishment inflicted on the sinful in order to pay the debt for their wrongdoings. Ham is cursed, only Noah and his family are saved from a flood that destroys the world, and Adam and Eve are cast out of the Garden of Eden. They sinned against God and now they must atone for this transgression. One might argue that this is the Old Testament God that punishes people and with the sacrifice of Christ, atonement has been achieved for all of us. This is all true, but Evangelical and Fundamentalist reactions to earthquakes, floods, and 9/11 constantly present a narrative of a God that will destroy the United States of America if this country continues to condone abortion, homosexuality, and the secularization of American society.<sup>28</sup>

After the abolition of slavery, the white supremacist culture was maintained through the institution of segregation laws. It was no longer necessary for African Americans to be enslaved, but they were still perceived to be undeserving of equality because of their possession of darker skin. Inferiority beliefs that were justified by Biblical

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<sup>28</sup> Laurie Goodstein, “Falwell: Blame abortionists, feminists, and gays,” *New York Times* featured in *The Guardian*, September 19, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/19/september11.usa9>.  
Frank James, “Pat Robertson Blames Haitian Devil Pact for Earthquake,” *The Two-Way: Breaking News From NPR*, January 13, 2010, [http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2010/01/pat\\_robertson\\_blames\\_haitian\\_d.html](http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2010/01/pat_robertson_blames_haitian_d.html).

myths, like Ham, were then used to justify segregation. African Americans were still unworthy and being punished. By using race as criteria to grant access to certain spaces, a hierarchy was demonstrated by the level of access granted. African Americans were not allowed in certain spaces and in others had to use a rear entry. This designation demonstrated the inferior status assigned to them. Whites could generally go wherever they wanted and could claim spaces already occupied by African Americans. This designation demonstrated the superior status assigned to them. Segregation laws served two functions: to enforce these practices and prevent the crossing of racial categories. Just as African Americans could not go into white spaces, whites were ostracized for going in some black spaces like “for colored only restrooms.” Other laws, such as miscegenation laws, were created to further prevent the crossing of these categories. Yes, whites were of higher status, but if they engaged in romantic relationships with African American people, their elevated status was then impacted. With these laws in place, the attitudes of whites and African Americans were influenced.

*Baptist Bible Tribune* editor and preacher Noel Smith wrote in various articles about his disgust with Civil Rights Activist Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his tendency to break the law. Smith regularly accused King of being a “heathen” and “hypocrite.”<sup>29</sup>

On more than one occasion I have deliberately said that Dr. King was a pious-talking hypocrite. And why did I say it? Because it is true. Dr. King talked about how everyone should obey the decisions of the Supreme Court and the Federal circuit courts. The courts had spoken and good Americans obeyed the orders of the courts. But the indisputable evidence is that all the time Dr. King knew that he would not obey court orders unless they suited Dr. King.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Noel Smith, “Martin Luther King Wants a Revolution,” *Baptist Bible Tribune* (Springfield, MO), Apr. 23, 1965, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, “Martin Luther King,” 3.

Smith felt that King believed that he was above the law and behaved accordingly. Smith dismissed King's argument concerning just and unjust laws as an excuse for King to do what suited him.<sup>31</sup> Smith was of the mind that Christians must obey the law unless it told them to worship a false god.

Dr. King is guilty of palpable falsehood when he implies that the New Testament and the practices of the early Christians authenticate his objective and methods. Those early Christians disobeyed the decrees against preaching Christ. But what other laws did the disobey? In his most famous letter to Trajan, Pliny told the emperor that all the evidence that he (Pliny) had against the Christians as law violators was that they worshipped Christ and would not worship the emperor. As for the New Testament – and very especially Paul – the letter and the spirit of it is that Christians – of all people – should recognize the constituted authorities and obey the laws.<sup>32</sup>

Discrimination was not a good reason, as far as Smith was concerned, to “instigate” trouble.

Through this examination of myth and belief systems, the cultural thread of hegemony can also be observed. The groundwork for the oppression of black people was laid during slavery. After the abolition of slavery, ideas about the inferiority of African Americans continued to persist and were then used to justify segregation. This resulted in a hierarchy in which whites, elevated by white supremacy dominated African Americans because of their perceived inferiority. This supremacy was legitimized through the creation of laws, further enforced by the interpretation of scripture in a way that elevated whites. African Americans experience oppression because of their “immorality” and despite the sacrifice of Christ, they must continue to atone for their transgressions throughout their lives. These beliefs were further cultivated by the enactment of laws that highlighted the

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<sup>31</sup> King defines just and unjust laws in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”. He writes, “A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law, or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law.”

Martin L. King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in *The Radical King*, ed. Cornel West, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 133.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, “Martin Luther King,” 3.



supposed inferiority of African Americans through the legalization of their continued mistreatment. Just like in the penal substitution model, where a just God must punish sin, oppressive laws against African Americans were viewed as just because of the perceived immoral nature of African Americans.

## PENAL SUBSTITUTION MODEL

The theology of atonement focuses on the reconciliation of human beings to God. There are multiple models representing various understandings of atonement, but their implementation is often layered and complex. For the purposes of my research, I chose to focus on the Substitutionary Atonement Theory, because I believe that my subjects subscribe to various models associated with this theory. Starting in the 1920s, the penal substitution model was embraced by Evangelical fundamentalists as the only orthodox way of interpreting the cross.<sup>33</sup> The penal substitution model states that through the pain and suffering Jesus Christ experienced on the cross, he absorbed God's punishment for the sins of humankind.<sup>34</sup> Essentially, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ atoned for the sins of the world, using Christ as a substitute for mankind. Although the term, "penal substitution" is attributed to 19<sup>th</sup> century theologian Charles Hodge, the model originated during the Reformation under Martin Luther and John Calvin.<sup>35</sup> This theory appears to begin and end with the suffering of Jesus Christ, but the internalization of this theory has in some ways impacted the ways that Christians interpret the suffering that they and others experience in their every day lives. By examining the ways that the penal substitution model may have influenced *Baptist Bible Tribune* editor and Southern Baptist preacher Noel Smith's understanding of Dr. King's nonviolence movement, we may encounter some examples of the negative ways internalization of this theory can play out.

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<sup>33</sup> Pugh, *Atonement Theories*, intro, para. 3.

<sup>34</sup> The penal substitution model is a subset of the substitutionary atonement model referenced in my introduction.

<sup>35</sup> Pugh. *Atonement Theories*, part 2, para 4.

Noel Smith began his preaching career as a member of the Southern Baptist Convention. Smith became disillusioned with the leadership of Louis B. Newton, and cut ties with the SBC in the 1940s. Smith then became associated with J. Frank Norris's World Baptist Fellowship organization and accepted a teaching position at the Bible Baptist Seminary.<sup>36</sup> Smith also served as the editor of Norris's paper, *The Fundamentalist*, until 1950 when a dispute over Norris' leadership choices caused a major split in the World Baptist Fellowship. Smith, along with a number of others, founded the Baptist Bible Fellowship, which is now Baptist Bible Fellowship International.<sup>37</sup> The split appears to have been largely political, rather than ideological. Smith founded the *Baptist Bible Tribune* in 1950 and served as editor until his death in 1974.<sup>38</sup> Smith also taught at the Baptist Bible College, which was also founded by BBF.

Smith used the *Baptist Bible Tribune* to discuss current events and world issues. He also discussed on more than one occasion, his distrust of King and disagreement with his methods for gaining access to civil rights. Smith took the moderate position that African Americans should have civil rights, but he did not believe that they were simply victims of an unjust and oppressive government. In his article, "Martin Luther King: There Is A Strange Silence and Lack of Debate About Him," Smith says

The Negro people, as a whole, are a miserable people. Their African ancestors are responsible for part of it; they rounded up their forefathers and sold them to white slave traders. The Negro people themselves are responsible for part of it; on the

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<sup>36</sup> A separatist, fundamentalist denomination founded by J. Frank Norris, after he was expelled from the SBC.

<sup>37</sup> A separatist, fundamentalist Baptist organization founded in 1950 by members that split from Norris's World Baptist Fellowship.

<sup>38</sup> Norma Gillming, "Noel Smith Founding Editor of the Baptist Bible Tribune" *Baptist Bible Tribune*, 2000-2014, [http://www.tribune.org/files/noel\\_smith.pdf](http://www.tribune.org/files/noel_smith.pdf).

whole, self-discipline, responsibility, energy, persistency, sound judgment, and pride in their surroundings, are foreign terms to them.<sup>39</sup>

According to Smith, African Americans have largely caused their own misfortune. Yes, they were enslaved, but only because they sold each other into slavery. Yes, they are poor, but they are not self-disciplined or responsible enough to improve their own situation. Smith was under the impression that African Americans were not doing much with the things they did have, so what is the white man's responsibility in all this? Smith did acknowledge the role of whites when he said "the white man has never done anything for the Negro that he wasn't forced to do..."<sup>40</sup> and that's where he leaves the responsibility of whites. He compared whites' unwillingness to do anything for African Americans to their unwillingness to dole out human rights to factory, mill, and railroad workers. Essentially saying that African Americans are not the only ones suffering, the implication being so why are you complaining? You're not being singled out. Despite all this, Smith did seem to believe that African Americans should have equal rights, but he disapproved of King's methods, stating: "Can there be any kind of responsible and orderly government, any kind of individual and collective security, when every man has the right to choose what laws he will obey and what laws he will violate?"<sup>41</sup> Smith felt that King's behavior was the opposite of Christian behavior and endorsing lawlessness. Smith takes exception to the fact that King believes that he does not have to submit to authority, when Christ and Moses submitted to God's will despite how much suffering they would have to endure in order to do so.

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<sup>39</sup> Noel Smith, "Martin Luther King: There Is A Strange Silence and Lack of Debate About Him," *Baptist Bible Tribune* (Springfield, MO), Nov. 17, 1967, pg. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, "Strange Silence," 1.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, "Strange Silence," 2.

Essentially, according to Smith, the civil rights protests were not Christ-like. What was Christ-like, according to Smith, was to endure injustice and suffering until God willed it to change or patiently wait on the government to change. He was more than likely influenced by Romans 13:1-5:

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently whoever rebels against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment, but also as a matter of conscience.

If every authority has been established by God, then disobedience to authorities could be perceived as disobedience to God. What type of Christian is disobedient to God? This sentiment is worth unpacking for multiple reasons. On the one hand, Smith insists that he believes in Civil Rights, "...I believe in Civil Rights... with practical, not abstract applications."<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, in cases where he acknowledged the discontent experienced by African Americans, he still insisted that African Americans should endure their suffering because that was the Christian thing to do. Smith also made it clear that his idea of "civil rights" did not necessarily coincide with what African Americans considered to be "civil rights." "I deny that anyone has the Civil Right to force by law different races to associate themselves together against their mutual desire and interests."<sup>43</sup> In essence, Smith disagreed with desegregation laws. A good segment of King's protests were geared

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<sup>42</sup> Noel Smith, "Constitutionally It Was Obscene," *Baptist Bible Tribune*, April 2, 1965, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Smith, "Constitutionally," 2.

towards desegregation and here Smith is disagreeing that it should be outlawed if both groups do not agree.

Smith also criticizes King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." In response to King's argument that only just laws should be followed, Smith said "The Rev. Mr. King's rationalization is satisfactory to himself, but the doctrine he enunciates, if universally applied by all citizens, would lead to anarchy."<sup>44</sup> It appears as though Smith believed that what was considered just and unjust was subjective and would vary from citizen to citizen, thus resulting in a culture of lawlessness. In the same article, Smith criticized King for participating in what he perceived as lawless behavior- seizing control of a slumlord's property in order to fix up the property for the impoverished residents. It did not matter to Smith that the landlord was violating the rights of his tenants by not providing them with safe and functional living conditions. According to Smith, King was violating the landlord's rights by taking control of his property. This was illegal and King was endorsing lawlessness. This leaves the question of what rights Smith believed African Americans deserved that they didn't already possess.

This interpretation of a God that would confine certain groups of people to certain fates, no matter how evil the condition they were experiencing seems to line up with an understanding of a God through the penal substitution theory of atonement. Smith, in fact, referenced the necessity of Christ to suffer and "purchase the church with His own blood."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Noel Smith, "The Supralegal Martin Luther King," *Baptist Bible Tribune*, March 25, 1966, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Noel Smith, "Dr. Stagg is Growing Up: He Once Believed in the Trinity," *Baptist Bible Tribune*, November 18, 1966, 7.

Hence, a clear emphasis on the necessary suffering Christ needed to endure in order to afford humankind salvation. Kenneth Stoltzfus writes <sup>46</sup>

The Penal Substitutionary understanding of the story seemed to emphasize a God whose defining characteristic was wrath and judgment. Although the Penal Substitution model does emphasize that God's love, grace, and mercy led him to search out a way for humans to avoid the punishment they deserve for their sin, the Penal Substitution story suggests that because God will not (or cannot) forgive sins without punishment taking place, he punishes Jesus Christ in the place of humanity. Thus, in the final accounting, it seemed that God was primarily concerned that someone be punished.<sup>47</sup>

If we accept that the penal substitutionary theory of atonement describes a God intent on wrath and judgment, that needs a sacrifice to atone for wrongs, one can also accept that these beliefs would in some ways influence the worldview held by Christians internalizing this belief. It is reasonable to consider that those with this worldview would think about other ways that God inflicts his judgment. Evangelical fundamentalists that believe in a God that is just would look for explanations for why injustices exist in the world. They would search for reasons that African Americans faced inequality that involved something inherent in African Americans themselves and they would explain it away as justified suffering. For example, Smith stated

The Negro, like the white man, has got to make progress on the basis of his character, not on the basis of the color of his hide. Even then, he has disadvantages—just as the white and brown and yellow and tan and freckled races have disadvantages. The universal law that all men on this earth succeed in the exact proportion as they master their disadvantages, is still operant... Nobody on this earth has the respect of anyone else unless he earns it."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Stoltzfus, through his work on social work, substance abuse, and spirituality, examines the social implications of the penal substitutionary theory. His perspective is valuable because I am also examining the social implications of this theory, albeit from a different perspective.

<sup>47</sup> Kenneth M. Stoltzfus, "Penal Substitution, Christus Victor, and the Implications of Atonement Theology for the Integration of Christian Faith and Social Work Practice," *Social Work & Christianity* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 310-326. *Academic Search Complete*.

<sup>48</sup> Noel Smith, "Negro Against Negro," *Baptist Bible Tribune*, April 28, 1967, 5.

Smith was of the mind that white people progressed based on their own merit, that they were deserving of all the things that they possessed. Everyone has disadvantages and skin color is not an obstacle that African Americans exclusively faced. Smith believed that there were ways for African Americans to earn respect and opportunity. If white people were deserving of everything they received and race is not a true hindrance to a better life, what is the real excuse for African Americans not achieving as much as whites? Smith's views reflect some inherent belief in the inferiority of African Americans. He is saying that racism isn't a real problem, just an excuse. Smith seemed to feel that to a certain extent, the situation that African Americans found themselves in was in some ways deserved and in other ways not their place to question.

The Negro's chief obstacle is the Negro. His chief enemy is the Negro. And all the "civil rights" bills Congress and state legislatures can pass, all the Harlem and Brooklyn hate and riots the Negro can instigate, will never do for the Negro what the Negro has got to do for himself.<sup>49</sup>

Again, Smith pointed out what he was certain to be an inherent issue with African Americans. They were responsible for their own situation and even if they were granted everything they asked of the government, nothing would get better for them until they could reflect on their own shortcomings. In this instance, Smith appeared to believe that the negative condition of African Americans could change, but he was still painting an entire group of people with a broad brush.

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<sup>49</sup> Noel Smith, "White and Black Crime," *Baptist Bible Tribune*, August 7, 1964, 4.



A fair criticism of this theory would be that the purpose of penal substitution is in fact, substitution.<sup>50</sup> If Smith believed that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was a stand in for the sins of humanity, why would he then also believe that African Americans needed to do things to atone for their own sins? The answer to this question is a complicated one. A common scripture used during slavery was 1 Peter 2:18-21:

Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

This scripture was used in several ways.<sup>51</sup> It was to enforce upon slaves the belief that they were to be submissive to their masters no matter how poorly they were treated and to highlight the ways in which suffering was Christ-like. Despite the pain Christ knew he would endure on the cross, he still submitted to God's will. Therefore enduring suffering brings one closer to Christ. Even though Christ has already endured suffering to atone for sins, if suffering is to be like Christ and therefore pleasing to God, it is not hard to imagine atonement being used the same way. Christ suffered in order to atone for the sins of humankind and he was wholly good, it would not be a stretch for Smith to believe that African Americans, who were not wholly good in the eyes of whites, were not doing enough

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<sup>50</sup> Penal substitution model focuses on the punishment aspect of Christ's suffering on the cross whereas the Christus Victor model focuses on the resulting triumph over evil achieved by the resurrection.

<sup>51</sup> During slavery, segregation, and even in contemporary times this scripture has been used in a variety of ways that go beyond a discussion of Christian obedience. However, this larger theological discussion lies outside of this project.

to atone for their sins during their lifetime. Smith felt that there were very few African Americans living their lives the right way. He did not see any reason to force any change.

Another thing to consider is the constant themes of justification found in Smith's writings about the inequality African Americans faced. Smith did not perceive civil rights as the solution to the problems African Americans experienced and he definitely did not agree with King's methods. Smith saw King as a clear representation of what he felt was primarily wrong with African Americans. He saw King as a lawless imposter, working to undue everything "earned" by whites in an attempt to "reward" a group he perceived as undeserving. After all to Smith, African Americans were deserving of the misfortunes they faced because: they were immoral, lazy, infidels, communists, and/or violent.<sup>52</sup> All these claims supported the belief that God was just and the conditions African Americans endured were a result of their own faults. This returns us to the penal substitution model that includes a God intent on wrath and judgment. For Smith, it is not difficult to believe that African Americans incurred the wrath of God, resulting in a judgment of a lower status in life. In his article, "A Theology for Racism: Southern Fundamentalism and the Civil Rights Movement," Bill J. Leonard mentions a preacher that disparaged the actions of King and other civil rights activists by referencing the apostles:

"it has never been the hallmark of Christian concern to overtly defy laws of the land... even bad laws," and insisted that if the apostles lived with the status quo for the sake of Christ and the advance of his kingdom, contemporary Christians should do the same.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Bill J. Leonard, "A Theology for Racism: Southern Fundamentalists and the Civil Rights Movement," *Baptist History And Heritage*, 34 no. 1 (1999): 56.

<sup>53</sup> Leonard, "Theology," 57.

In other words, if the apostles endure hardships and obeyed laws, what right did African Americans have to resist doing the same? Yes, Jesus's sacrifice on the cross was for everyone, but according to Smith and other Evangelical fundamentalists, that did not exclude sinners from experiencing their own punishment during their lifetime. There could be a parallel between the atonement Christ paid for through his pain and suffering and the route Smith feels African Americans must take. In order for African Americans to achieve freedom from oppression, an internal change must first occur. Once they pay that price, a new life will follow. One filled with the equality and acceptance of which African Americans yearned.

## CHRISTUS VICTOR MODEL

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolent movement was influenced and framed by King's theology and a synthesis of ideas gleaned from a wide range of theorists, but for the purpose of this paper, I will focus on Mahatma Gandhi's influence on King's view of transformative nonviolent suffering. King was a Christian that saw his own suffering as redemptive, just as Christ's was, as long as this suffering was purposeful and undeserving. In other words, the suffering experienced by African Americans participating in King's nonviolent movement was redemptive because they did not deserve it.<sup>54</sup>

In *The Gita and Satyagraha*, Gandhi says that nonviolence means "conscious suffering."<sup>55</sup> He emphasizes that this is not the same as passive submission to the will of the oppressor, but rather it is "pitting one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant."<sup>56</sup> The purpose of the protest is resistance, not submission to the violence. If one is submitting to violence out of fear, they are not truly resisting. Fearlessness is required of the resister in order for their protest to be effective, and thus be resistance. Passive acceptance of violence is not resistance. Similarities between King's movement and Gandhi's can be drawn, especially concerning the emphasis on suffering. King said that Gandhi was "the guiding light to our technique of nonviolent social change."<sup>57</sup>

King takes Gandhi's ideas and builds on them by examining the possible responses that oppressed people could have to injustice. This examination leads him to the conclusion

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<sup>54</sup> This does not mean that King believed that some people deserved to suffer, but rather that there was something redemptive about undeserved suffering.

<sup>55</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, *The Gita and Satyagraha*, in *Religious Studies 2001 Reader*. Atlanta: GSU's Copy Corner, (2015, 54).

<sup>56</sup> Gandhi, *The Gita*, 54

<sup>57</sup> Martin L. King, Jr., "My Trip to the Land of Gandhi," *Ebony*, (July 1959, pp. 84-92).

that the most effective way for oppressed people to deal with oppression is through nonviolent resistance.<sup>58</sup>

...the principle of nonviolent resistance seeks to reconcile the truths of two opposites-Acquiescence and violence –while avoiding the extremes and immoralities of both. The nonviolent resister agrees with the person who acquiesces that one should not be physically aggressive toward his opponent but he balances the equation by agreeing with the person of violence that evil must be resisted. He avoids the nonresistance of the former and the violent resistance of the latter. With nonviolent resistance, no individual or group need submit to any wrong, nor need anyone resort to violence in order to right a wrong.<sup>59</sup>

Essentially, nonviolent resistance is the appropriate route to fight injustice without having to sink to the level of the oppressor. The nonviolent resister has avoided evil and still found an effective way to address the injustice they are experiencing. King believed that “noncooperation” with evil was a moral obligation.<sup>60</sup>

King takes Gandhi’s concept of “conscious suffering” and changes it to the Christ-centered “redemptive suffering.” For King, suffering is redemptive for individuals in the same way that Christ’s suffering was redemptive for humankind. This is not to say that the two are one in the same, but in the case of human suffering, if it is unearned, it will not be in vain. Theologian Rufus Burrow, Jr. states, “King believed that unearned suffering is redemptive because of something he believed even more deeply about God, namely, that God will not allow evil to have the last word; will not allow evil and injustice to be victorious over good and justice.”<sup>61</sup> Burrow believes that it is important to include King’s identity as a personalist when examining King’s theology surrounding redemptive

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<sup>58</sup> Martin L. King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom*. (Harper & Brothers, 1958).

<sup>59</sup> King, *Stride*, 49.

<sup>60</sup> Garth Baker-Fletcher, *Somebodyness: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Theory of Dignity*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 35.

<sup>61</sup> Rufus Burrow, Jr., *Martin Luther King, Jr. And the Theology of Resistance*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), loc 5468.

suffering. For King, it was important to acknowledge “that human beings are inalienably and inviolably sacred because summoned into existence, sustained, enhanced, and loved by the God of the Hebrew prophets and Jesus Christ.”<sup>62</sup> Because of the sacredness of human beings, Christ’s suffering was redemptive for mankind because it resulted in salvation for all. Unearned suffering of human beings was redemptive because the nature of God would not allow those inflicting the suffering to be triumphant over good. In a *Christian Century* article, King explained how his personal struggles assisted in informing his belief that unearned suffering could be redemptive.

My personal trials have also taught me the value of unmerited suffering. As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways that I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course. Recognizing the necessity for suffering I have tried to make of it a virtue. If only to save myself from bitterness, I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transform myself and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains. I have lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive.<sup>63</sup>

Here King highlighted his own intent and choice in his suffering. He knew his suffering was unearned and he chose to use that suffering to fight injustice. This is a clear distinction from the penal substitution model in which suffering is the result of sin. In his sermon, “Questions that Easter Answers,” King emphasized the victory of the resurrection over the evil inflicted on Christ on Good Friday. “Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day; but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant beat of the drums of Easter...It says to us sometimes a vicious mob may take possession and crucify the most meaningful and

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<sup>62</sup> Burrow, *Martin*, loc 207.

<sup>63</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “Suffering and Faith,” *Christian Century* 77, (Chicago, IL) April 27, 1960.

sublime and noble character of human history.”<sup>64</sup> Evil will not win in the end, even if it appears that is currently the case. This is important because this highlights King’s belief that his efforts would be successful.

In some cases, King felt that the suffering could also be redemptive for the evil-doer. King acknowledged that there were some people that would not be moved by the suffering of others, in those cases the suffering would be redemptive for those suffering because of God’s unwillingness to allow evil to win out. In other cases, King sought to appeal to those he thought could experience redemption through the suffering of others. He did this by directly addressing these groups and explaining his methods. One example of this can be seen in King’s “Letter From A Birmingham Jail.” King decided to directly address white clergyman who he believed should be swayed by the suffering of their Christian brothers and sisters, despite racial differences. King held them accountable for their failure to assist African-Americans in their quest towards freedom from oppression.

There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period that the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was the thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But they went on with the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven" and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest. Things are different now. The contemporary church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's often vocal sanction of things as they are.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Rufus Burrow, Jr., *Martin Luther King, Jr. And the Theology of Resistance*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), loc 5468.

<sup>65</sup> Martin L. King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in *The Radical King*, ed. Cornel West, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 141.

Here King responded directly to those that claimed that his group was not behaving the way that Christians should by invoking the memory of Christian martyrdom. To Noel Smith and others that claimed that it was never the nature of Christianity to explicitly disobey laws, King was reminding them of the Christians that were persecuted for their refusal to stop proselytizing and worshipping Christ, despite it being against the law. King made sure to clarify that the disobedience of Christians was not just about worship, but about the immorality of the laws restricting their freedom to worship Christ.

A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an "I-it" relationship for an "I-thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful.<sup>66</sup>

King was likening himself and others in the Civil Rights movement to the Christian martyrs, and Smith and others found that uncomfortable. In his book, *A Stride Toward Freedom*, King states:

Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community even when one seeks to break it. Agape is a willingness to sacrifice in the interest of mutuality. Agape is a willingness to go to any length to restore community. It doesn't stop at the first mile, but it goes the second mile to restore community. It is a willingness to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven to restore community. The cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go in order to restore broken community. The resurrection is a symbol of God's

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<sup>66</sup> West, *Radical*, pg. 133.



triumph over all the forces that seek to block community. The Holy Spirit is the continuing community creating reality that moves through history.<sup>67</sup>

King reminded them that unearned suffering is found in the roots of Christianity. It is, in fact, central to the theology of atonement: Jesus did not deserve to be nailed to the cross, yet he was. Christ's unearned suffering resulted in victory over evil for humankind. King's words demonstrated why Smith did not have the grounds to claim that King was not behaving like a good Christian when Smith said:

Can there be any kind of responsible and orderly government, any kind of individual and collective security, when every man has the right to choose what laws he will obey and what laws he will violate? Does Dr. King have a wisdom that Moses never had, a wisdom that Christ never had, a wisdom that the Founders of this government never had? Has there ever been in the history of the world a successful social and political order of the kind advocated by Dr. King? <sup>68</sup>

The most interesting thing about Smith's questions is that he is actually making King's case for him. Christ did determine which laws were just and unjust. Christ had enemies because he encouraged Jews to disobey laws that he felt were no longer necessary. Smith is in fact, highlighting the comparison that King and others in his movement had to Christ.

I believe that King embraced the "Christus Victor" model of atonement theology over the penal substitution model. The Christus Victor model portrays Christ as victorious on the cross.<sup>69</sup> Christ dying on the cross is triumphant, because he has resisted and defeated evil through his death on the cross. There is a clear parallel between King's instruction on redemptive suffering and the triumphant death of Christ. The refusal to engage in anything but nonviolence, in resistance to evil is similar to Christ's refusal to

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<sup>67</sup> Martin L. King, Jr. "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," in *The Radical King*, ed. Cornel West, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 52.

<sup>68</sup> Noel Smith, "Martin Luther King: There Is A Strange Silence and Lack of Debate About Him," *Baptist Bible Tribune* (Springfield, MO), Nov. 17, 1967, pg. 2.

<sup>69</sup> Pugh. *Atonement Theories*, part 2, para 4.

resist his captors that placed him on the cross. Those involved in the movement do so in order to free other African Americans from the bondage of oppression, just as Christ's suffering was done in order to free the world from the bondage of sin. The suffering of both is in turn redemptive and victorious. According to Theologian Luther Ivory, King interpreted this as "God's most powerful and definitive statement against alienation, apathy, and violence" and "evidence of the radical and extensive nature of divine sacrificial love. . . . Jesus Christ was the concrete embodiment of revolutionary consciousness and the articulator of a gospel of freedom."<sup>70</sup>

For King, this victory did not end with desegregation, but with the formation of the beloved community:

The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community. The aftermath of nonviolence is redemption. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation. The aftermath of violence are emptiness and bitterness. This is the thing I'm concerned about. Let us fight passionately and unrelentingly for the goals of justice and peace. But let's be sure that our hands are clean in this struggle. Let us never fight with falsehood and violence and hate and malice, but always fight with love, so that when the day comes that the walls of segregation have completely crumbled in Montgomery, that we will be able to live with people as their brothers and sisters.<sup>71</sup>

King's vision of this community would be the result of individuals trained in the philosophy of nonviolence, unwilling to allow the ills of the world: poverty, violence, discrimination, injustice, etc. to persist.<sup>72</sup> King felt that these goals were attainable with discipline and training. The current suffering and sacrifice experienced by African Americans was

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<sup>70</sup> Luther Ivory, *Toward a Radical Involvement: The Theological Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) 84.

<sup>71</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Birth of A New Nation," *The Martin Luther King Papers Project*, April, 7, 1957, [http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/primarydocuments/Vol4/7-Apr-1957\\_BirthOfANewNation.pdf](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/primarydocuments/Vol4/7-Apr-1957_BirthOfANewNation.pdf), 162

<sup>72</sup> Ivory, *Radical Involvement*, 84.

redemptive because it would lead to a community that was worth their sacrifice. King stated:

There is no crown without a cross. I wish we could get to Easter without going to Good Friday, but history tells us that we got to go by Good Friday before we can get to Easter. That's the long story of freedom, isn't it? Before you get to Canaan you've got a Red Sea to confront. You have a hardened heart of a pharaoh to confront. You have the prodigious hilltops of evil in the wilderness to confront. And even when you get up to the Promised Land, you have giants in the land. The beautiful thing about it is that there are a few people who've been over in the land. They have spied enough to say, "Even though the giants are there we can possess the land, because we got the internal fiber to stand up amid anything that we have to face."<sup>73</sup>

In the same way that Jesus' suffering on the cross resulted in eternal life for all who sought him, King believed that there was victory waiting for African Americans as a result of their suffering.

In "I've Been to the Mountaintop," the last speech King would give before he was assassinated, King expressed the acknowledgement that he may have to sacrifice his life in order for the rest of the community to prosper.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!<sup>74</sup>

King saw it as his duty to keep working, even if it resulted in the loss of his own life. The reward would be greater than the price in his eyes.

King did see similarities between the suffering experienced by himself and members of his nonviolent protests and Christ. Suffering for both parties was redemptive, just in different ways. Christ's suffering was redemptive for mankind as a whole because it was

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<sup>73</sup> King, "Birth," 163.

<sup>74</sup> Martin L. King, "I've Been to the Mountaintop,"

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>

ordained by God and unearned. The suffering of those involved in nonviolent protests was redemptive for themselves as well as those observing because God would not allow this suffering to be in vain. King's focus on the perceived reward at the end of the suffering is another parallel with the Christus Victor model's emphasis on the reward of salvation. This is in complete contrast to the penal substitution model adopted by Evangelical fundamentalists who perceived atonement as a way to pay or make up for sins, while King perceived it as transformative and redemptive.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it isn't difficult to see how religious interpretations can be filtered through culture. Each interpretation of atonement theology developed through a cultural lens. Anselm of Canterbury lived in a society that put honor on a pedestal and believed that people were indebted to the owners of the land they lived on. This influenced his view of Jesus's sacrifice as a satisfaction theory. The development of laws and implementation of a system of government with judges appointed to decide cases of law, caused some Christians to follow a more penal model of atonement. The desire for freedom and equality caused King to envision a victorious model of atonement. Gramsci's theory of Cultural Hegemony outlines the impact law and order has in structuring a society. When the lawmakers' version of justice is perverted, it can harm some members of the society it was created to serve. Whether or not justice is served is through the eye of the judge.

The penal substitution model sets God up as a just judge that creates laws to be followed by humankind. Disobedience to these laws is considered sin. Sin must be punished. God is only just if he punishes the sinners. Unfortunately, humankind cannot appropriately make amends for their sins. The debt is too high. Jesus stands in and pays the debt for humankind. God's wrath inflicts all the punishment that humankind deserved on Jesus. Jesus' blood is what is owed and it is the only thing sufficient to pay off this debt.

Noel Smith lived in a society that oppressed African Americans and privileged whites. Through this class structure, Smith learned and fostered a worldview that legitimized the social marginalization of African Americans and naturalized the social superiority of whites. Smith saw African Americans the way that God saw the sins of

humankind. Smith saw God as a just judge who would not let the undeserving pay a debt they did not owe. He considered the mistreatment faced by African Americans as justified through the claim that they were mentally, spiritually, and physically inferior to whites. The penal substitution model emphasizes the need for punishment in order to atone for wrongdoing. If African Americans were perceived as guilty of countless wrongs, why would Smith or other whites be moved to make life better for them? Smith and others could comfortably resist desegregation with the understanding that things were exactly the way that God wanted them to be. Who were they to challenge his will?

King disagreed with the notion that certain categories of people had to endure suffering simply because of their race. He embraced the Christus Victor model. The Christus Victor model pulls back from the sinful nature and necessary punishment of humankind, to focus on the relationship of sin with Satan. According to this theory, Satan was the proponent of evil in the world. Christ's death was not simply a punishment for humankind, but a triumph of good over evil. Through Christ's sacrifice Satan was defeated and humankind was rewarded with salvation and closeness to God. In this model, God's ultimate goal is to defeat evil, not to inflict his wrath. This really highlights King's relationship with the Christus Victor model.

King rejected the notion that God created any human beings to be inferior to other human beings. He perceived the injustices experienced by African Americans as evil that had to be addressed in a nonviolent fashion. King's understanding of atonement as redemptive and victorious influenced him to see the suffering experienced by he and others involved in his movement the same way. The suffering was a temporary setback, but in the end good would triumph over evil.

Just as Christians expected to be rewarded with heaven upon their deaths, King expected to see the results of his community's suffering rewarded through the realization of the "Beloved Community." I assert that there is a parallel between King's adoption of the Christus Victor model and his nonviolent movement. Christ's suffering was redemptive for mankind, by atoning for the sins of the world and giving them an opportunity to attain paradise. King believed that African Americans' suffering was redemptive for their community in order to bring about a community free from injustices, violence, poverty, and hunger in this world. King felt that the trials and tribulations faced by he and other participants in his movement were not unlike the Christian martyrs of early Christianity.

Brock and Parker felt that the internalization of the traditional understanding of the crucifixion could be dangerous. I don't think they are wrong about that. The idea of suffering as a means to atone for one's sins taken out of a Biblical context does not really serve humankind well. Smith's interpretation resulted in the constant oppression of African Americans. The perceived immorality of African Americans made Smith feel that they had no right to resist their current circumstances. Smith felt that if African Americans were patient and truly sought God, their circumstances would improve. King's interpretation resulted in a nonviolent movement for Civil Rights and his belief that unearned suffering was redemptive was a callback to Christian martyrdom.

I think that the more we examine these theological concepts within the context of modern society, the more we understand the world around us. This research opened up my eyes to the historical context missing from many modern conversations surrounding faith and race. Peeling back the layers of atonement theology allowed me to examine the ways that culture not only influences, but can also be influenced by religious views. The common

question that each interpretation appeared to answer was “Why do we suffer?” The penal substitution model explains suffering as the result of sin. The Christus Victor model explains suffering as a necessary trial on the road to victory.

This thesis made me think about the ways our religious beliefs can implicitly influence our perceptions of other people and our own experiences. I think this is something that should be explored and discussed further. We often look the obvious causes of problems like segregation, which in this case would be racism. I believe that there is always a bigger picture and there are often multiple underlying issues that work together to cause the larger problem at hand.



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