

# The Divine-Infusion Theory: Rethinking the Atonement

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I have always wondered about the meaning of the atonement. Why was it necessary for Christ to suffer? What did his suffering accomplish? How did it work? Growing up as a Latter-day Saint, I was taught that Christ suffered the punishment for my individual sins to satisfy the demands of justice, thereby making it possible for me to be forgiven. Although I found some aspects of this explanation troublesome, I did not know that this was only one of many explanations of the meaning of the atonement. As I became aware of other theories, I began to reevaluate my own understanding of the meaning of the atonement.

The theory I grew up with is often referred to as the penal-substitution theory, and it is the most prevalent theory of the atonement in modern Christianity. The central idea of this theory is that Christ suffered vicariously for our sins—that he stood in our place to suffer the punishment we deserved. This theory is accepted by the vast majority of Latter-day Saints, despite a passage in the Book of Mormon that seems to explicitly reject vicarious suffering for sin:

Now there is not any man that can sacrifice his own blood which will atone for the sins of another. Now, if a man murdereth, behold will our law, *which is just*, take the life of his brother? I say unto you, Nay.

But the law requireth the life of him who hath murdered. (Alma 34:11–12; emphasis mine)

Amulek makes it clear that it is not merely the Nephite law, but the law of justice itself that will not allow one person to pay for the sins of another. If one person cannot atone for the sins of another, as this scripture states, then why was Christ able to atone for our sins? The seeming injus-

tice of vicarious suffering is one of the primary difficulties with our theory of atonement.

In 1999, R. Dennis Potter published an excellent paper in this journal, "Did Christ Pay For Our Sins?"<sup>1</sup> His paper begins with Amulek's rejection of penal substitution and builds upon it to deliver a persuasive argument against the penal-substitution theory. He uses a number of arguments and examples to illustrate the injustice of vicarious suffering and concludes by suggesting we abandon the penal-substitution theory in favor of what he calls the empathy theory of the atonement. Although I find the bulk of his paper persuasive and enlightening, I remain unsatisfied by the empathy theory. Inspired by Potter's audacity in suggesting an alternate theory of atonement, I will follow his lead by advancing my own theory of atonement, which similarly rejects penal substitution, but offers a different explanation from Potter's for the purpose of the atonement. I call my proposal the divine-infusion theory.

The explanations I received growing up were borrowed directly from traditional Christian theories of atonement. This is unfortunate, because the Book of Mormon's emphasis on the meaning of the atonement puts Latter-day Saints in a unique position to shed new light on old problems of atonement theory. With this in mind, I will rely heavily on the scriptures and revelations of the restored gospel.

### A Brief History of Atonement Theory

It seems appropriate to begin by stepping back from the narrow focus of the penal-substitution theory to get a broader view of atonement theory. A brief review of the most prominent theories of atonement will give a flavor of the differences that exist between the various theories of atonement, and illustrate the fundamental difficulties of devising a compelling theory.

#### *The Ransom Theory*

The ransom theory was the dominant theory of atonement for most of the first thousand years following the death of Christ; its development is often attributed to Origen (185-254). It is based on the idea that through the fall, humankind became captive to the devil, hostages of Satan. In response to this crisis, God offered Christ as a literal ransom in exchange for humankind. Satan agreed to the deal but was deceived by God, not knowing that Christ would resurrect and escape his control.

The ransom theory draws on biblical language that refers to Christ

as a ransom, but on its own, it does not offer a compelling explanation of the atonement. If the only problem was that Satan took humanity hostage, then why didn't God simply take humanity back by force? The idea that God had to bargain with Satan for humankind flirts dangerously with dualism, the doctrine that good and evil are equivalent or nearly equivalent cosmic forces.<sup>2</sup> This theory also invites criticism for suggesting that God was a deceiver in the arrangement. Despite its historical significance, this theory has had little influence on Mormon thought.

### *The Satisfaction Theory*

An alternative to the ransom theory was eventually championed by Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury (1033–1109). His "satisfaction theory"<sup>3</sup> is based on the idea that the atonement was not needed to appease Satan, but God. Justice, he says, demands that we give God his due at all times. Whenever we fail to give God his due, this is sin. By sinning, we dishonor God. Something had to be done to restore God's honor, and this could only be done through Christ's suffering and death.<sup>4</sup>

The biggest problem with the satisfaction theory is that it is difficult to see why God's honor would be restored through the tortured death of his only perfectly obedient Son. How does undeserved suffering add to God's honor? Anselm never gives a satisfactory answer to this question.

### *The Moral-Influence Theory*

Peter Abelard (1079–1142) developed a radically different theory of the atonement. His moral-influence theory rejected the idea that the atonement accomplished something objective. Instead, he suggested that the atonement works only because it influences the human heart. The atonement was Christ's perfect example to humanity. Suffering was not required to satisfy God or justice, but simply to set an example which would inspire moral behavior.<sup>5</sup>

The biggest problem with the moral-influence theory is that its premise undermines the absolute necessity of the atonement. Consider, for example, that, if it is true, the atonement could still work even if it never actually happened. The only important thing, according to the moral-influence theory, is that people believe in the story and are inspired by it. In principle, this could have been accomplished equally well with a fictional story, as long as people believed it to be true.

That leads to a second criticism. If it was not strictly necessary for Christ to suffer, we might reasonably ask if his suffering was a good way,

on its own, to inspire obedience. Keep in mind that according to the moral-influence theory, the *only* purpose for Christ's suffering was to provide an example. If someone were run over by a train because she was pushing her child to safety, we would see this self-sacrifice as a moving example of love. However, if she were to jump in front of an oncoming train just to set an example (without saving someone in the process), it would make no sense at all. If the act does not accomplish anything objective, then what is it setting an example of?

### *The Penal-Substitution Theory*

The penal-substitution theory became popular during the Reformation (ca. 1500), as variations of it were taught by Martin Luther and John Calvin. This theory is really just a variation of the satisfaction theory; the major difference is that the necessity of the atonement was based on satisfying *justice* instead of satisfying *God*. The penal-substitution theory is based on the idea that justice demands suffering for sin and that Christ stood in as a substitute for us to satisfy this demand of suffering.<sup>6</sup>

Because Mormons usually explain the atonement in the same language as the penal-substitution theory, I will explore the problems with this theory in more detail. Potter's paper was devoted almost entirely to the discussion of this theory, and he spent much of it illustrating the injustice of penal substitution. His critique strikes to the core of the theory, since justice, by definition, cannot demand injustice.

From my experience of discussing the atonement in casual settings with other Latter-day Saints, some have been bothered by the injustice of the atonement, but most do not initially see the problem. The most common question is: If Christ volunteered, where is the injustice? We all readily see that it was unjust to punish Christ for sins he did not commit; but since he volunteered, this injustice is part of what makes his sacrifice so awe inspiring. I agree. The fact that Christ volunteered does answer the problem of the injustice to him.

The more difficult problem is explaining why his suffering should allow us to be pardoned. As Amulek asked, "If a man murdereth, behold will our law, which is just, take the life of his brother?" (Alma 34:11). Likewise, Potter asked, "Why should facts about what Jesus did convince God to pardon us?"<sup>7</sup> Justice demands that the guilty are punished and that the innocent are not punished. It is all right that Christ chose to endure suf-

fering which justice did not demand, but why would justice accept that suffering as payment for our sins?

We would never think to absolve a criminal because his mother felt vicarious guilt for his crimes, or even because she agreed to serve his jail term. Our sense of justice does not include a provision for the transfer of guilt because justice is inextricably rooted in one's merited deserts. To make vicarious suffering seem just, we must pretend that justice demands suffering without regard to whether it is deserved, but this is not how we think of justice in any other setting. In this way, penal substitution ignores our most basic understanding of what justice means.

A second problem with the penal-substitution theory is that it undermines the notion of forgiveness. Imagine for a moment that you owe me \$1,000 and I tell you I will forgive the debt as long as you find someone else to pay me the \$1,000. This would be ridiculous, because forgiveness of a debt *means* not requiring payment. We cannot continue to say that God forgives sins in the same sense that debts are forgiven if Christ fully paid the debt incurred by sins. If justice was fully satisfied by Christ, it seems that everyone should be forgiven of their sins automatically.<sup>8</sup>

A third problem with the penal-substitution theory is that it fails to explain why we cannot pay for our own sins. The price of sin is suffering, and we are capable of suffering. We sing that "there was no other good enough / to pay the price of sin," but we never explain why "goodness" qualified Christ to pay for sin.<sup>9</sup> We say that it was because Christ was divine, or that he was perfect, but neither of these is an intuitive qualification. On the contrary, our sense of justice suggests that it is the guilty person who is uniquely qualified to pay for his or her own sins.

### *The Empathy Theory*

As a replacement to the penal-substitution theory, Potter offers the empathy theory of the atonement. According to the empathy theory, justice can be satisfied equally well by punishment or by forgiveness. He illustrates this notion of justice by comparing God to the priest in one of the opening scenes of *Les Misérables*. The priest chooses to forgive Jean Valjean for stealing his silver, rather than pressing charges and sending him to jail. Just as the priest could satisfy the demands of justice by forgiving Valjean, God can satisfy justice by forgiving us.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Christ's suffering was not required to satisfy justice because God's forgiveness fully satisfies justice.

But there's a catch. Although justice can be satisfied by punishment or forgiveness, justice allows forgiveness only under certain circumstances. God must determine "when it is best to forgive"<sup>11</sup> instead of punish. This determination should be based on the circumstances surrounding the sin, the remorse felt by the sinner, and the reform accompanying that remorse.<sup>12</sup> This is where the atonement comes in. Without the atonement, Christ would have been ignorant of all three and thus would have been unable to forgive us. The purpose of the atonement was to make Christ aware of the data upon which we could be judged:

The suffering in Gethsemane is a miraculous event in which Jesus experiences exactly what each of us experiences in our sinning. Only then can he fully understand why we do what we do. Only then can he fully understand the circumstances of our crimes. Only then can he know our remorse, and know whether our hearts have changed. . . . It is the bringing to his understanding the hearts and minds of humanity that is the atonement. . . . Being one of the judges himself, this understanding of our hearts allows him to justly pardon us in the event that we feel remorse for our sins.<sup>13</sup>

The principal problem with the empathy theory is that it gives the atonement no direct influence on humankind. The only person directly affected by the atonement was Christ. How then, does the atonement *save* us? The empathy theory seems to answer by saying that Christ saves us by judging us fairly. This strikes me as inadequate. Doesn't the atonement do anything to help us overcome the fall of Adam and Eve? The scriptures speak of man becoming "a saint through the atonement" (Mosiah 3:19) and children being "sanctified through the atonement" (D&C 74:7). In addition, Lehi says the atonement brought about the resurrection (2 Ne. 2:8). The empathy theory doesn't account for the atonement's active influence on man.

To further illustrate this problem, consider what would have happened without the atonement. Because the atonement had no direct influence on human beings, we must suppose that the history of the world would have been unchanged. The difference would have come at the time of judgment. If there were no atonement, the same number of people would have *deserved* salvation (based on their same actions), but all of them would have been damned because Christ would have been unable to judge them correctly. His ignorance of their circumstances, remorse, and reform would have prevented him from judging them fairly and thereby from saving them.

The scriptures put this claim in perspective. *Without* the atonement, “all mankind must unavoidably perish” (Alma 34:9). *With* the atonement, Jesus “glorifies the Father, and saves all the works of his hands, except those sons of perdition” (D&C 76:43). Can this monumental difference in outcomes be adequately accounted for solely by a change in God’s knowledge of the facts? If the primary purpose of the atonement was to effect a change in Christ, then the hopeless situation without the atonement must be explained by a deficiency in Christ. The scriptures, however, consistently teach that the hopeless situation was due to a deficiency in fallen man.

### *Summary of Overview*

These brief sketches illustrate the difficulties inherent in atonement theory. Each theory attempts to answer the same basic questions: What was the central problem that made the atonement necessary? How did the atonement solve the problem?

The satisfaction theory says that sin dishonors God—a reasonable enough problem statement. The difficulty arises in showing how the atonement could have solved that problem. The moral-influence theory posits a more convincing problem: that our sins will prevent us from living with God unless we turn from them and follow Christ’s example. Again, the difficulty arises in showing how the atonement solved that problem.

The penal-substitution theory avoids a repetition of the same mistake by framing the problem with the solution in mind. The solution consisted of suffering, so the problem must be that sin can be remitted only by suffering. This explanation of the atonement connects the solution to the problem but makes the problem less compelling. The empathy theory offers a problem that matches the solution (it seems reasonable that suffering vicariously would give Christ empathy and enable him to judge fairly), but centering the whole thing on a deficiency in Christ undercuts many other aspects of our scripture and doctrine. Hopefully, it is becoming clear why devising a compelling theory of atonement is so difficult.

### **The Divine-Infusion Theory**

With this historical backdrop in place, I will introduce my own theory of atonement which builds on Potter’s rejection of vicarious suffering but offers a different explanation of what was accomplished by the atonement. I call it the divine-infusion theory.



Before diving into a detailed exploration of the theory, a brief introduction will be beneficial. The divine-infusion theory identifies two problems. The first is the problem of sin. Our sins prevent us from living in the presence of God. The problem of sin made the plan of salvation necessary. Justice demanded that we become celestial beings to be saved in the celestial kingdom, and we needed some way to do that.

The second problem is the fall of Adam, which would have thwarted God's plan of salvation were it not for the atonement. The reason that the fall would have been devastating is that, without the atonement, it would have resulted in a condition far worse than our current "fallen" state. To avoid confusion with our current state, I give the name "super-fallen state" to the state that would have prevailed were it not for the atonement. One major task for the divine-infusion theory will be to define this super-fallen state and show why it would have thwarted God's plan. The Book of Mormon introduces the possibility of a super-fallen state and tells us what it would have been like.

The purpose of the atonement was to prevent the super-fallen state from becoming actual. Rather than undoing the fall entirely, the atonement lessened the depth to which we fell. That is, it lessened the degree to which the earth and its inhabitants were cut off from God's presence. The atonement accomplished this by infusing all of creation with a bit of divinity called the light of Christ. This light, existing in and through all things as a consequence of the atonement, lifted the whole creation out of the super-fallen state brought on by the fall and gave us the opportunity to repent and be saved. The theory takes its name from the crucial role of the light of Christ as an infusion of divinity to humankind and the universe.

While cursory, this introduction provides the basic outline for how the theory will unfold. A discussion of the meaning of justice will illustrate the need for the plan of salvation, and the nature of that plan. I will then discuss the fall, the potential for a super-fallen state, and the way in which the atonement prevented the super-fallen state from occurring.

### The Nature of Justice

Understanding the nature of justice is essential to understanding the atonement. I argue that justice can be satisfied only by reform on the part of each individual and that, when justice prescribes suffering, it is always for the purpose of bringing about that reform.

The Book of Mormon says that the atonement satisfied the de-



mands of justice (2 Ne. 9:26; Mosiah 15:9), but what is it that justice demands? We get conflicting answers from the two basic concepts of justice found in the Book of Mormon. The first answer is that justice demands punishment for infractions of the law; I will refer to this notion of justice as *punitive justice*. The second answer is that everyone should get what they deserve; I will refer to this as *deserts justice*. We wrestle with these two notions of justice whenever we try to decide what to do with a seemingly reformed criminal. Should we remove or reduce the punishment for a reformed criminal?

Punitive justice dictates that a guilty person must pay the full price of the law, regardless of whether he or she changes. This is because punitive justice is based solely on the principle of punishment. However, deserts justice says that, once a guilty person has reformed, he is no longer required to suffer because he is no longer deserving of punishment. Thus, deserts justice is only concerned with the current self, while punitive justice is primarily concerned with past actions.

There is often disagreement about which of these concepts of justice is more fundamental, but most people accept both to some extent. Both ideas have some basis in our innate sense of justice. However, determining which one takes precedence over the other has far-reaching implications on the atonement. Consider, for example, the effect this can have on the meaning of repentance.

Punitive justice leads to a concept of repentance focused on suffering and remorse. If the law requires suffering for the remission of sin, it follows naturally that repentance is our experience of that cleansing pain. However, according to deserts justice, the important part of repentance is not the suffering, but the change of heart. We can stop suffering when we have become good, as the moral law requires. According to deserts justice, the purpose of suffering is to bring about reform; but for punitive justice, the suffering is an end in itself. For help in understanding the relationship between deserts justice and punitive justice, we turn to the scriptures.

#### *Deserts Justice in the Scriptures*

For Alma, the concept of justice is embodied and described in the principle of restoration:

The plan of restoration is *requisite with the justice of God*; for it is requisite that all things should be restored to their proper order. . . .

And it is *requisite with the justice of God* that men should be judged according to their works; and if their works were good in this life, and the de-

sires of their hearts were good, that they should also, at the last day, be restored unto that which is good. (Alma 41:2-3; emphasis mine)

This is a description of deserts justice. The principle of restoration dictates that we will get what we deserve based on our works. Justice demands that we reap what we sow. This concept of justice is further developed in the Doctrine and Covenants, which provides the necessary background for a deeper understanding of deserts justice.

Every person who comes in to the world is given the light of Christ (D&C 88:6-7). "He that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day" (D&C 50:24). The connection to justice starts to unfold when we learn that the light of Christ is "the law by which all things are governed" (D&C 88:13). This law (the light of Christ) governs not only humans but also the kingdoms filling the immensity of space:

All kingdoms have a law given;

And there are many kingdoms; for there is no space in the which there is no kingdom; and there is no kingdom in which there is no space, either a greater or a lesser kingdom.

And unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every law there are certain bounds also and conditions.

*All beings who abide not in those conditions are not justified.* (D&C 88:36-39; emphasis mine)

These scriptures come together to give an interesting perspective on justice. The universe is full of kingdoms of varying degrees of glory. Likewise, it is also full of people of varying degrees of glory. In both cases, the glory corresponds to varying degrees of law. To inhabit a certain degree of glory, you must progress to a matching degree of glory as a person. That is, you must be able to abide by the law of the kingdom to reside there.

The connection between this concept and the law of restoration is made in the next passage:

All beings who abide not in those conditions are not justified.

*For* intelligence cleaveth unto intelligence; wisdom receiveth wisdom; truth embraceth truth; virtue loveth virtue; light cleaveth unto light; mercy hath compassion on mercy and claimeth her own; justice continueth its course and claimeth its own. . . (D&C 88:39-40; emphasis mine)

To be "justified" is to abide by or to be squared with the demands of justice. Everything following the connecting word *for* in the verse above is an explanation of why those who cannot live the law are not justified. It is

because intelligence cleaveth unto intelligence; truth embraceth truth; virtue loveth virtue and so forth. Thus, who you are determines the kingdom to which you belong. This modern-day scripture shares language with Alma's description of restoration:

And now behold, is the meaning of the word restoration to take a thing of a natural state and place it in an unnatural state, or to place it in a state opposite to its nature?

O, my son, this is not the case; but the meaning of the word restoration is to bring back again evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish—*good for that which is good; righteous for that which is righteous; just for that which is just; merciful for that which is merciful.* (Alma 41:12–13; emphasis mine)

Alma's doctrine of restoration is clearly based on the same concept of justice described in Doctrine and Covenants 88. Our deserts, then, are ultimately manifest in the kind of people we are and what degree of light we have obtained. In the end we will get what we deserve through the principle of restoration. If our works were good, we will be restored to that which is good; if our works were evil, we will be restored to that which is evil. We will reap what we sow because our actions shape who we will become.

Modern revelation teaches this concept in terms of the actual structure of the universe (every space with a kingdom and every kingdom with a law; D&C 88:36–37) which means deserts justice is an unavoidable and inescapable consequence of the nature of the universe.

#### *The Role of Punitive Justice*

The scriptures also describe justice in terms of punishment. The most explicit example of this approach is found in Doctrine and Covenants 82:4: "Ye call upon my name for revelations, and I give them unto you; and inasmuch as ye keep not my sayings, which I give unto you, ye become transgressors; *and justice and judgment are the penalty which is affixed unto my law*" (emphasis mine).

This scripture portrays a very intuitive concept of justice in which violators of the law face punishment as a result of their disobedience. Justice is identified as "the penalty" affixed to the law. It clearly endorses punitive justice, which demands punishment when the law is violated. However, the ultimate sanction for punitive justice is much different than that of deserts justice.

We saw that deserts justice is described as a consequence of the

structure of the universe. By contrast, punitive justice is introduced as a practical matter, created to facilitate repentance:

Now, how could a man repent except he should sin? How could he sin if there was no law? How could there be a law save there was a punishment?

Now, there was a punishment affixed, and a just law given, which brought remorse of conscience unto man. (Alma 42:17-18)

Thus, punitive justice is functional—intended to bring about repentance. Once a person has reformed through the repentance process, there is no more purpose for punishment.

The reason punitive justice exists at all is to make us aware of the eternal consequences of deserts justice. Deserts justice will not be fully realized until final judgment. In the meantime, punitive justice helps us to understand the ultimate consequence of our actions. We learn what actions will lead eventually to misery and which will lead to happiness. Once we have learned that lesson and chosen to follow a path of righteousness, the punishment has served its purpose.

### Justice and Mercy

The idea that mercy cannot rob justice is frequently at the center of Mormon discussions of the atonement. According to the penal-substitution theory, God would “rob justice” if he forgave sins without inflicting the required punishment. Those who reject the penal-substitution theory commonly do so on the grounds that justice is not fundamentally punitive. Thus, God can forgive without inflicting punishment if he chooses. For example, Potter argues that “it strikes me as right that God can decide to forgive without punishment.”<sup>14</sup> It strikes me the same way.

If justice is concerned only with reform and if punishment exists to bring about that reform, then it should be possible to remove all remaining punishments once a person has truly changed. This conclusion is taught forcefully in the Book of Mormon. Several scriptures refer to the “claims” of justice and mercy. Even God is bound by these claims, for he “cannot deny justice when it has its claim” (Mosiah 15:27). Justice has a claim on people who “do evil” and “die in their sins” (Mosiah 2:38; 15:26). Mercy’s claim, on the other hand, is based on repentance (Alma 12:34).

In his masterful discourse on the atonement, Alma states four separate times that mercy’s claim is based on repentance (Alma 42:22-31). We learn that mercy has no claim on the wicked, even if they feel intense guilt.

By itself, remorse is not enough to enable mercy; it must be coupled with reform to give mercy a claim (Mosiah 2:38–39). This relationship further supports the precedence of deserts justice over punitive justice.

We often quote Alma's teaching that mercy cannot rob justice (Alma 42:25), but we have largely ignored Amulek's teaching that mercy can "overpower" justice: "And thus he shall bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name; this being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the bowels of mercy, *which overpowereth justice*, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance" (Alma 34:15; emphasis mine). This scripture states that mercy can overpower justice on condition of repentance, meaning that some portion of the punishment can be omitted when there has been true repentance.

However, if a person does not repent, he must endure the full punishment dictated by punitive justice: "And thus mercy can satisfy the demands of justice, and encircles them in the arms of safety, while he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice; therefore only unto him that has faith unto repentance is brought about the great and eternal plan of redemption" (Alma 34:16). Thus, the Book of Mormon confirms the idea that just punishment can be mercifully overruled, but only when true reform has taken place.

This conclusion undermines our usual explanation of the atonement by suggesting that there is no need for suffering (vicarious or otherwise) once we have reformed from our sinful ways. It also provides its own answer to the question of what justice demands: We must learn to live the celestial law before we can be saved in the celestial kingdom. God cannot simply decide to save us in the celestial kingdom based on his love, because mercy cannot rob justice. Justice is ultimately concerned with what we are—not merely that we obtain forgiveness from God, but that we become like God if we want to live where he does. The plan of salvation exists to make this growth possible.

### The Plan of Salvation

If we reject vicarious suffering, as this theory of justice suggests, we create the problem of finding a new explanation for the purpose of Christ's suffering. Our initial review of atonement theory illustrates how difficult this can be. A key scripture will help us succeed where others have failed. In Doctrine and Covenants 88—the same section in which we found the ultimate meaning of justice—we are given a key insight into the

purpose of the atonement: "Jesus Christ . . . descended below all things, . . . *that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth; . . . the light of Christ*" (D&C 88:5-7; emphasis mine)

This scripture answers the question of what the atonement accomplished. Jesus descended below all things so that the light of Christ might be in and through all things. Without the atonement, there would be no light of Christ as we have it now. I readily concede, however, that the theory does not explain why suffering was required to accomplish this infusion. I simply accept that it does on the authority of scripture.

The rest of the theory explains why the light of Christ is so crucial as to be considered the principal consequence of the atonement. If infusing the light of Christ was the purpose of the atonement, the theory must answer some tough questions. How did the light of Christ satisfy the demands of justice? How did it overcome the fall? Answering these questions will require us to mean more by "the light of Christ" than just a vague metaphor for God's influence or presence in the universe. Despite its enigmatic nature, the light of Christ manifests itself in its most concrete way as the source of conscience. The crucial role of conscience will become clear as we continue.

The importance of the light of Christ cannot be fully appreciated without an understanding of the plan of salvation and the role of the fall in that plan. Joseph Smith's description of the plan is as insightful as it is original:

God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge. He has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences, that they may be exalted with himself, so that they might have one glory upon another, and all that knowledge, power, glory, and intelligence, which is requisite to save them in the world of spirits.<sup>15</sup>

This statement provides crucial perspective by explaining the plan in a context prior to the fall. God's purpose in instituting laws was to create an environment in which weaker intelligences could advance in knowledge, power, and glory. Justice demands that we be celestial to inhabit the celestial kingdom, and there was no magic wand to make us so. It could only come "one glory upon another" through our own experiences and choices.

In a moment, the difference between God's strength and our weakness will help to explain the fall, so it is important to understand what it means that we were weak. We were weak in the premortal world in the sense that we were dependant on God's light and influence. We were weak in that our behavior was greatly influenced by our environment. In God's presence we were good, but we could not maintain the same level of goodness without God's influence.

Christ showed us what it means to be strong. Even though he took on a mortal body and faced the challenges and temptations of a fallen world, he remained perfectly obedient. He was "in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). He had it within himself to choose goodness in any situation, even when he was forsaken by the Father. This is the type of strength we lacked, and the purpose of God's plan was to help us overcome our weakness.

### The Fall

This leads to the highly unorthodox view in Mormon theology that the fall was a necessary part of God's plan. It was important for our progression that we leave God's presence to freely exercise our agency through character-shaping choices. We often focus on the good aspects of the fall; but to understand the atonement, we must also understand what was bad about the fall—the super-fallen state which it brought about.

First, the super-fallen state is not the doctrine of original sin. In Christian theology, original sin typically means that (1) We are in some sense culpable for Adam's sin; and/or (2) Because of Adam's sin we inherit a sinful predisposition. These doctrines of original sin raise problems similar to those raised by Christ's vicarious suffering. For example: Why should I be held responsible for Adam's sin? How is it possible that Adam's sin could change who I am as a person? Neither idea seems just.

Joseph Smith explicitly rejected the first doctrine of original sin in the second Article of Faith: "We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam's transgression." The second doctrine (that Adam's sin predisposed his posterity to sin) is often accepted in Mormon writings, but it is just as troublesome as the first. To say that Adam's sin gave all his children an innate predisposition to evil is to say that Adam changed who they were in a fundamental way. External temptations are one thing, but internal predispositions constitute what we call character and help to define who we are. I submit that this second doctrine of origi-



nal sin is inconsistent with our commitment to agency, individuality, and autonomy.

If we embrace Joseph Smith's rejection of original sin and his description of the plan, we are left with a less problematic view of the fall. Joseph Smith provided the key when he said that the plan was created because of our weakness in the premortal world. This explanation allows us to account for fallen human nature by a change of environment, without reference to a mystical connection between Adam's action and our natures. Rather than giving us a sinful nature, the fall merely placed us in an environment in which our weakness was exposed.

After Adam and Eve taught their children in the fallen world, Satan came in among them and said "Believe it not; and they believed it not, . . . And men began *from that time forth* to be carnal, sensual, and devilish" (Moses 5:13; emphasis mine). The implication is that any devilishness we exhibit is a result of our own disobedience rather than Adam's original sin. We are accountable for our own actions and cannot blame Adam for making us sinful.

The result of Adam's transgression was that the earth and its inhabitants were cut off from God's presence and influence. Were it not for the atonement, this separation from God would have been complete—a possibility I have referred to as a super-fallen state. In the actual fall, we were not completely cut off from God because the atonement provided us with the light of Christ. We often think of our current state on earth as the only fallen state, but this view ignores the potential of the super-fallen state, causing us to overlook one of the most important accomplishments of the atonement: preventing the super-fallen state.<sup>16</sup>

### The Atonement

The atonement counteracted the fall by giving us the light of Christ in the form of conscience, which makes us aware of what is good and makes us feel that we ought to be good. To understand the super-fallen state, we need only imagine our predicament in mortality: with bodies prompting us to indulge our physical desires (which occurs) and with Satan tempting us to choose evil (which also occurs) but without the guidance of conscience. In this situation, it seems clear that we would have chosen "eternal death, according to the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein, which giveth the spirit of the devil power to captivate" (2 Ne. 2:29).

Lehi clarifies how conscience counteracts the super-fallen state: "The Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. *And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil;* to act for themselves and not to be acted upon" (2 Ne. 2:26; emphasis mine). According to Lehi, it is because of the atonement that we are free to act and that we know good from evil. Both ideas seem strange from a typical Mormon perspective. We usually teach that agency is intrinsic to intelligence, and that our knowledge of good and evil was a result of the fall rather than the atonement.

Although we sometimes think of our knowledge of good and evil as a consequence of the fall, it was actually a result of the fall and the atonement together. It was because of the fall that we became subject to the devil and began to directly experience evil (Mosiah 16:3; Moses 5:11). However, our knowledge of good was, and is, a result of the atonement.

Moroni 7:16 says that "the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil. Moroni continues by admonishing us to "search diligently in the light of Christ," knowing that "every thing which inviteth to do good . . . is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ" (Moro. 7:16, 19). Thus, our ability to recognize goodness comes from the light of Christ. This is the reason the light of Christ is so frequently equated with conscience.

It may seem unusual to think of conscience as a gift, because we think of our conscience as our own. However, if there is one thing the study of ethics has shown, it is that we all have a sense of right and wrong without knowing where it comes from or how it arrives at its conclusions. And this is just what we should expect, if conscience is a borrowed light. This expectation is a natural one in Mormon theology, where the doctrine that conscience is a manifestation of the light of Christ is well established.<sup>17</sup> The full significance of this gift in helping to overcome the fall is found in its connection to agency.

### Agency

Lehi's claim that the atonement made us free is initially perplexing because we think of agency as individuality and autonomy. These fundamental aspects of agency existed in the premortal world and were neither created nor destroyed by the fall. However, the degree to which we are able to exercise our agency depends on our circumstances, which *were* greatly affected by the fall and the atonement. We can understand how the atone-

ment enabled our agency by considering three conditions which expand our ability to exercise our agency.

The first is genuine alternatives and the ability to choose among them. God told Enoch: "In the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency" (Moses 6:32). God gave agency to Adam and Eve in the garden by giving them a choice. They were commanded not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; nevertheless, they could choose to do so if they wished (Moses 3:17). There can be no meaningful exercise of agency without a choice between genuine alternatives.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the next two conditions, this one did not depend on the atonement. After the fall, Adam and Eve would have had genuine choices even without the atonement.

The second condition is that the alternatives from which we choose must be of interest to us. This is the meaning of Lehi's statement that "man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other" (2 Ne. 2:16). The importance of enticement is reiterated in modern scripture where God declares that "it must needs be that the devil should tempt the children of men, or they could not be agents unto themselves" (D&C 29:39).

Moroni makes the connection to the atonement by explaining the source of our enticement in his discussion of the light of Christ:

That which is evil cometh of the devil; for the devil . . . inviteth and *enticeth to sin*, and to do that which is evil continually.

But behold, that which is of God inviteth and *enticeth to do good* continually. (Moro. 7:12-13; emphasis mine)

Initially, it was not obvious to me why agency should rely on enticement, but the answer is clear upon reflection. Think back to the last time you were asked to choose between two alternatives for which you had absolutely no preference. For me, this was last week when my wife asked me if she should set up her doctor's appointment for Tuesday or for Wednesday. I had absolutely no preference either way. In this case, I got out of choosing by telling her that it did not matter to me one way or the other. But sometimes (maybe this was the case for you), the person asking presses you to make the decision. I find that when I am pressed to choose between alternatives that do not interest me, I prefer to flip a coin rather than choosing. That is because choice loses its meaning when you are not enticed one way or the other. It is still a choice in the sense of having two alternatives from which to choose; however, with no reason to care about

the different outcomes, there is no cause for deliberation. Choice becomes a mental coin toss.

The third condition for the meaningful exercise of agency is that there be a moral component to our choices. Moral agency requires choices between good and evil: "And it is given unto them to know good from evil; *wherefore* they are agents unto themselves" (Moses 6:56; emphasis mine). Agency can exist without the knowledge of good and evil, but *moral* agency cannot. Since moral agency was essential to God's plan, we had to have a knowledge of good and evil to be agents in the requisite sense. Thus, moral agency is enabled by the atonement because our knowledge of good is a direct result of the atonement, through the light of Christ.

This analysis of agency explains Lehi's claim that the atonement made us free to choose between good and evil. We could not be moral agents without enticement toward the good and without a knowledge of good and evil. The two most distinguishing features of conscience are that it tells us what is right and that it makes us feel that we ought to do what is right. In other words, conscience gives us a knowledge of good and entices us toward the good. Thus, our moral agency is made possible by the gift of conscience.

We can see, now, why God's plan would have been thwarted by the fall and how the atonement made salvation possible. Without conscience, we would have had no practical hope of choosing the right and overcoming temptation. We rely on borrowed light for our recognition of goodness. We could not progress through the exercise of agency if our environment was full of temptation toward sin without anything tempting us toward righteousness.

#### *Summary of the Divine-Infusion Theory*

We are now prepared to summarize the divine-infusion theory. We have covered considerable ground, touching on justice, mercy, agency, the fall, and the plan of salvation. All of this analysis comes together to create the divine-infusion theory of the atonement.

Unlike the traditional theory in which justice demands punishment, the scriptures suggest that the ultimate demand of justice is that we inherit a place in the universe based upon what we have become. This concept of justice fits well with our understanding of the plan of salvation, which was designed by God to help lesser intelligences advance in their ability to live higher laws.

To grow and progress, we had to leave God's presence to go to a place where we could freely exercise our agency.<sup>19</sup> Thus, some sort of fall (i.e., separation from God) was required. The problem with the fall was that its unmitigated effect would have left us in a state in which we could not progress. In this super-fallen state, being totally cut off from God, we would have had nothing to make us aware of what was good and to entice us toward the good. In such a state, we would not have been moral agents in the sense required by God's plan. Without conscience teaching us what is good and enticing us to be good, we would have been endlessly lost, as the Book of Mormon suggests (Mosiah 16:4).

The atonement saved us from the fall by giving us the light of Christ, manifest as conscience. If we respond to the prodding of conscience by rejecting temptation and choosing the right, we receive more light. Our potential is realized through this process of *becoming*, which finds its fullest expression in eternal progression. With the addition of the light of Christ, mortal probation became an essential testing ground where we could progress through choice and accountability.

King Benjamin referred to this process as putting off the natural man, yielding to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and becoming saints through the atonement of Christ (Mosiah 3:19). This is the essence of repentance (i.e., change toward the good), and the only means of satisfying the demands of justice (i.e., that we learn to live celestial law before going to the celestial kingdom). The atonement makes us free so that our choices can determine the extent of our justification. Samuel the Lamanite portrayed our situation in exactly this way (Hel. 14:30-31).

The atonement was not a matter of satisfying justice's relentless thirst for suffering. Instead, it was a matter of pulling the universe far enough out of the darkness to make repentance and growth possible. The atonement "bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance" (Alma 34:15). Thus, the atonement satisfies the demands of justice by making it possible for us to become celestial. A dual emphasis on grace and works follows naturally. Our works make us who we are and determine our final destiny, but every good work we do is enabled and influenced by the light of Christ in us.

The divine-infusion theory provides a clear and compelling necessity for the atonement that is based on our most fundamental understanding of God's plan. It does not answer the question of why suffering was necessary to infuse the light of Christ in and through all things, but such

is the testimony of modern revelation. It solves many of the philosophical problems posed by the fall and the atonement, and it is also woven tightly into the unique metaphysics underlying LDS theology. Further strengths of the divine-infusion theory emerge by examining its answers to a few common questions.

1. *What about the resurrection?* The Book of Mormon consistently emphasizes the atonement's role in bringing about the resurrection (2 Ne. 2:8; 9:6, 22; Mosiah 16:7; Alma 21:9, 42:23; Hel. 14:15; Morm. 9:13). It is striking, then, how out of place the resurrection is in the traditional theories of atonement. For example, there is no obvious connection between the resurrection and justice's demand for suffering. Sins might incur a debt to justice, but certainly death does not. In the empathy theory, Christ suffered so that he could understand our circumstances, remorse, and reform. I see no plausible link between his improved empathy and the "power of the resurrection" (Jac. 4:11) spoken of in the Book of Mormon. In the moral-influence theory, where the atonement merely sets an example, there seems to be no hope of accounting for the resurrection.

In the divine-infusion theory, the resurrection is not so out of place. Christ performed the atonement to bring about the light of Christ—the "light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things" (D&C 88:13; emphasis mine). Abinadi draws on this concept when he speaks of the resurrection:

But *there is a resurrection*, therefore the grave hath no victory, and the sting of death is swallowed up in Christ.

*He is the light and the life of the world*; yea, a light that is endless, that can never be darkened; yea, and also a life which is endless, that there can be no more death. (Mosiah 16:8–9; emphasis mine)

This passage clearly connects the resurrection and the light of Christ. Paul said, "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ, shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22). In a similarly universal way, the light of Christ "proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space" (D&C 88:12). The atonement brought life to all things by infusing the light of Christ through all things. Surely this fact makes the resurrection more at home in the divine-infusion theory than in any of the other theories.

2. *Why was it necessary for Christ to be perfect?* We teach that Christ had to be perfect to perform the atonement, but we have a difficult time explaining why. In contrast, the reason is quite obvious in the divine-infusion



sion theory. The purpose of the atonement was to pull all of creation out of darkness, to breathe life and light and goodness back into all things. It seems natural that to infuse all things with goodness, you must be good yourself. The penal-substitution theory has very little to offer as an explanation for why Christ had to be perfect to perform the atonement. The divine-infusion theory offers an intuitive and more satisfying answer.

3. *Why can't I pay for my own sins?* I criticized the penal-substitution theory for its failure to explain why I cannot atone for my own sins. The price of sin appears to be suffering, and I am certainly capable of suffering. The scriptures even say that the unrepentant will eventually suffer "even as" Christ (D&C 19:17). What, then, prevents me from rejecting Christ's suffering and saving myself? Why is Christ the only way to salvation? (Mosiah 3:17).

The answer is that the atonement is not about "paying" for sins as we usually think of it. Suffering alone cannot remit sins. Ultimately, the plan of mercy is made possible through repentance, which the atonement made possible through the gift of conscience. The real purpose of suffering (even in Doctrine and Covenants 19) is to bring us to repentance and to spur progress.

Alma set up his experience as the model of what happens in hell. He said he was "racked with eternal torment" and "tormented with the pains of hell," even with "the pains of a damned soul" (Alma 36:12-16). That suffering brought about a change of heart, so that when he finally turned to Christ, his torment ended abruptly. Alma's experience describes the painful path the wicked will tread on their way to the telestial kingdom (D&C 76:103-106). The pains of hell will motivate change in those who were wicked on earth. They were wicked on earth, but they will have to repent and reform before they can be saved in the telestial kingdom. Justice demands it.

4. *Why must we repent if Christ paid the price of our sins?* Acceptance of the debt analogy from the penal-substitution theory often leads to an incorrect understanding of forgiveness. The penal-substitution theory says forgiveness can be granted only on condition of payment to justice.<sup>20</sup> In my critique, I asked why we are not automatically forgiven if Christ paid the full price of sin. If forgiveness is conditioned on the payment of a debt, and the debt was paid, then forgiveness should be automatic. The penal-substitution theory is vulnerable to this criticism because it incorrectly conflates justification with forgiveness. In reality, the two are quite differ-



ent. Justification is a process of coming into conformity with law, but forgiveness is simply a matter of relationship.

When my wife forgives me for being insensitive, this does not mean that I do not need to change, nor does it mean that I have already changed. It simply means that she is willing to forget the incident and that she will not allow it to come between us in the future. Her forgiveness restores our damaged relationship. In the same way, God can forgive us long before we are justified. His forgiveness does not remove our need to become celestial; it simply restores our relationship so that we can continue to approach God with confidence. Thus, the empathy theory is correct when it says God can forgive without punishment, but it is incorrect when it concludes that this forgiveness satisfies the demands of justice.

5. *Don't the scriptures say that Christ "paid" for our sins?* I have cited many scriptures to support specific points of the divine-infusion theory, but of course, other scriptures could be cited in seeming opposition to the theory. Although space does not permit a thorough discussion of such scriptures, I have found one objection to be the most common. The objection is that we cannot abandon penal substitution because it is taught explicitly in the scriptures. Consider, for example, Isaiah 53:5: "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed."

We are so accustomed to interpreting this passage as a statement of penal substitution that it may be hard to see how the divine-infusion theory would explain it. However, it is very easy to understand this scripture (and many others like it) in terms of the divine-infusion theory if we keep one point in mind: The scriptures are almost always ambiguous about the mechanism of atonement.

The scriptures speak frequently about what happened (suffering), and what resulted (salvation), without making it clear how the one leads to the other. It helps to recognize that this is not uncommon in everyday speech. For example, when I am told a person is "running a marathon to cure cancer," I do not mistakenly assume that the marathon itself is what cures other people's cancer. It would be equally natural to say that the person was running *for* cancer. The actual mechanism is more complicated than what the sentence describes: by running the marathon, the runner encourages people to donate money, which in turn funds research, which eventually leads to new treatments for cancer.

The complicated nature of the mechanism does not clash with the statement, "he is running a marathon to cure cancer." However, if I had spent my whole life thinking that one person's running magically cured another person's cancer, I might think it utterly ridiculous to believe that "he is running to cure cancer" meant something about money and research. You may experience something like this when you first try to consider the scriptures about the atonement in a new light.

In the divine-infusion theory, it is still the case that Christ suffered under the weight of our sins to free us from the bondage of those sins. The difference is only in the purpose of this suffering. I have suggested a new reason for how and why it works, but it does not conflict with the basic statements about what the suffering ultimately brought about.

### Notes

1. R. Dennis Potter, "Did Christ Pay for Our Sins?" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 32, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 73–86.

2. Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965), 86.

3. As set forth in *Cur Deus Homo*, retrieved on May 21, 2005, from <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/anselm-curdeus.html>.

4. B. H. Roberts followed in the footsteps of Anselm when he argued: "It is the breach in the law that must be mended. . . . The Atonement is . . . a matter of satisfying the insulted honor and majesty of God adequately." B. H. Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1907–12), 4:94.

5. Cleon Skousen developed an imaginative variation of the moral-influence theory in which the purpose of the atonement was to persuade all of the undeveloped intelligences in the universe to permit God to ignore the demands of justice. W. Cleon Skousen, *The First 2000 Years* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1953), appendix. This one-sentence summary is not the most favorable one possible, but I believe it to be an accurate restatement of his central premise.

6. Many Latter-day Saints are familiar with the penal substitution theory through Boyd K. Packer's parable that describes the atonement in terms of a debtor who cannot pay his debt, a creditor who demands payment, and a mediator who allows both justice and mercy to be satisfied by paying the debt for the debtor. Boyd K. Packer, "The Mediator," *Ensign*, May 1977, 54. Potter discusses the problems with this parable in some detail.

7. Potter, "Did Christ Pay for Our Sins?" 83; emphasis his.

8. For this reason, the penal substitution theory leads naturally to either a doc-

trine of universal salvation or to a doctrine of limited atonement in which, for example, Christ paid only for the sins of the elect.

9. Cecil Frances Alexander, "There Is a Green Hill Far Away," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), No. 194.

10. Potter, "Did Christ Pay for Our Sins?" 82.

11. *Ibid.*, 82.

12. *Ibid.*, 83. At this point, the example from *Les Misérables* appears to be a bad one, since Valjean exhibited neither remorse nor reform and the circumstances were less than exculpatory.

13. *Ibid.*, 83-84.

14. Potter, "Did Christ Pay for Our Sins?" 82.

15. Joseph Fielding Smith, ed. and comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976), 354.

16. Blake T. Ostler, "The Development of the Mormon Concept of Grace" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 24, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 58-64, describes a similar role for the atonement as the means of preventing what he calls *theoretical original sin*.

17. A few examples are Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965-73), 2:274-75; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, edited by Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954-56), 1:51; Harold B. Lee, *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, edited by Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 101. For contemporary discussions on the light of Christ, see Boyd K. Packer, "The Light of Christ," *Ensign*, April 2005, 8-14. He gave this talk originally on June 22, 2004, at the Missionary Training Center in Provo, Utah, at a seminar for new mission presidents; and [no author/editor], *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, July 2004), 96.

18. See Blake T. Ostler, "The Development of the Mormon Concept of Grace," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 24, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 58-60, for a more fully developed form of this idea.

19. "Our first parents were cut off both temporally and spiritually from the presence of the Lord; and thus we see they became subjects to follow after their own will" (Alma 42:7).

20. B. H. Roberts, *Seventy's Course in Theology*, 4:102-3, adopts this reasoning: "The *ground work of their forgiveness* and restoration to union with God must be that the penalty due to their sin has been paid. This or Justice goes unsatisfied." Emphasis mine.