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"Does Jesus Have to be God to Die for our Sins?: A Critical Examination of Anselm's Satisfaction Theory and other Trinitarian Atonement Theories"

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Abstract

Many Trinitarians claim that Jesus had to be God to die for our sins. In this paper, I address this particular question through multiple stages of church history: before Anselm, in Anselm, and in modern times with a specific theory forwarded by Robin Collins. My contention is that all of these atonement theories fail on both biblical and logical grounds. The biblical account presents a perfect human being dying for the sins of humanity, while Trinitarian accounts that make Christ's deity essential to the efficacy of his death raise more questions than they answer and fail the biblical test.

The Concept of Atonement

The Christian concept of "atonement" is notoriously easy to understand in basic terms and difficult to understand in a more robust theological way. The basic English definition of "atonement" is "1: reparation for an offense or injury, satisfaction; 2: the reconciliation of God and humankind through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ."[1] As you can see, the Christian doctrine of atonement is so foundational to the meaning of the word in the English language that it is definition 2![2] As philosopher Robin Collins points out in his essay on atonement, every Christian agrees on the doctrine of atonement; that is, every Christian agrees that Jesus died for our reconciliation with God. But every Christian has a different theory of how that exactly

[1] Merriam-Webster, "Atonement," Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, accessed August 13, 2026, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/atonement.

[2] This is largely due to the fact that William Tyndale, one of the early translators of scripture into the English language, popularized the use of the word "atonement" in his translation of the Bible. See David Rolph Seely, "William Tyndale and the Language of At-one-ment," accessed August 13, 2026, https://rsc.byu.edu/king-james-bible-restoration/william-tyndale-language-one-ment.

works out.[3] To that end, there are many notable atonement theories available for consideration, each with unique histories, pros, and cons.[4]

The Problem at Hand

Since there are a variety of atonement theories available, the question becomes: what essential biblical truths are necessary to believe about Jesus's death? While Sean Finnegan gives eight minimal, biblical reasons for Jesus's death,[5] Trinitarians would probably argue that there is one reason that Finnegan leaves out entirely that actually provides the foundation for atonement in the first place: Jesus had to be God to die for our sins. From a historical perspective, this argument comes in its most robust form in Anselm's work *Why God Became Man*. In this paper, I will ask the question: does Jesus have to be God to die for our sins?" And further, I will consider the origins of this belief, current and modern applications of this belief, and what the biblical texts have to say about this important question.

Precursors to Anselm

While Anselm made critical advances with the concept that Jesus had to be God to die for our sins, some of the building blocks of Anselm's beliefs come from earlier sources. Here is a quote from Irenaeus[6] in *Against Heresies*:

> Therefore, as I have already said, He caused man (human nature) to cleave to and to become, one with God. For unless man had overcome the enemy of man, the enemy would not have been legitimately vanquished. And again: unless it had been God who had freely given salvation, we could never have possessed it securely. *And unless man had been joined to God, he could never have become a partaker of incorruptibility. For it was incumbent upon the Mediator between God and men, by His relationship to both, to bring both to friendship and concord, and present man to God, while He revealed God to man.* For, in what way could we be partaken of the adoption of sons, unless we had received from Him through the Son that fellowship which refers to Himself, unless His Word, having been made flesh, had entered into communion with us? Wherefore also He passed through every stage of life, restoring to all communion with God.[7]

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[3] Robin Collins, "Understanding Atonement: A New and Orthodox Theory," last modified 1995, accessed April 13, 2016, http://home.messiah.edu/~rcollins/Philosophical%20Theology/Atonement/AT7.HTM.

[4] See the analysis of eight biblical reasons for Jesus's death and seven separate atonement theories in Sean Finnegan, "Why Did Jesus Die?," accessed August 13, 2026, https://restitutio.org/2016/04/17/why-did-jesus-die-paper-for-2016-theological-conference/.

[5] Ibid.

[6] I interpret Irenaeus as a logos subordinationist of some form or fashion and not Trinitarian or even "proto-Trinitarian."

[7] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.18.7, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), revised and edited by Kevin Knight, accessed August 13, 2026, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103318.htm.

Irenaeus argues here that Jesus was man joined to God, and that this fact is foundational for understanding how Jesus could be the mediator between God and man. Without getting too far into the weeds, Irenaeus has a different mechanism for atonement than Anselm (recapitulation and participation). While his language hasn't fully developed into orthodox Trinitarianism, he still serves as an important precursor to the idea that the mediator's divinity is relevant to the subject of atonement.

Another example comes a little later from Athanasius, who wrote the following in his book *On the Incarnation*:

> For He [Jesus] was made man that we might be made God; and He manifested Himself by a body that we might receive the idea of the unseen Father; *and He endured the insolence of men that we might inherit immortality.* For while He Himself was in no way injured, being impassible and incorruptible and very Word and God, men who were suffering, and for whose sakes He endured all this, He maintained and preserved in His own impassibility.[8]

In the passages consider briefly here, Athanasius goes further than Irenaeus in developing the idea that Christ's divinity has an active role in the atonement process. Although Athanasius' theory shares several key distinctions from Anselm's view, Athanasius does argue that the Word's assumption of a human body is essential to the atonement process. Still later in history, Augustine proposes the advantages of Jesus being both God and man in the incarnation that include the idea of mediating for us to God.[9]

Anselm's **Why God Became Man**

This leads us to a massive historical landmark for the idea that Jesus had to be God to die for our sins — Anselm of Canterbury and his book *Cur Deus Homo (Why God Became Man).* Anselm wrote this book in the late 11th century, some thousand years after the time of the apostles. Anselm was a Benedictine monk from Italy and a brilliant thinker and theologian.

At this point, I think it helpful to briefly sum up Anselm's argument, which is detailed, generally well-reasoned, and extensive. Anselm argues:

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[8] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54.3, trans. Archibald Robertson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892), revised and edited by Kevin Knight, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2802.htm, accessed August 13, 2026 (emphasis added).

[9] Augustine, *On the Trinity*, trans. Arthur West Haddan, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), revised and edited by Kevin Knight, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130108.htm, accessed August 13, 2026.

1. Sin is a violation of God's honor. We owe God perfect obedience, and so when we disobey God through sinning, we violate God's honor. (This largely comes from Anselm's historical context of lords, ladies, and feudal life.)

2. Forgiveness and satisfaction are not identical. Even if God is merciful and can grant forgiveness, there is still a debt of satisfaction to be paid. This is one of Anselm's most controversial arguments, especially from the perspective of modern detractors.

3. Repentance is not enough for humans to be forgiven and satisfied of their debt to God. Once someone has sinned, they owe God a debt that must be repaid through satisfaction.

4. The satisfaction required for humanity's sin must be larger than anything in creation besides God,[10] so Jesus must be God in order to satisfy the debt of sin collectively.

5. The debt must be paid by a member of humanity because humanity incurred the debt in the first place.

6. The cross is a means of satisfying a debt, not a punishment from God. This crucial point separates Anselm's argument from penal substitutionary atonement (commonly called PSA).[11]

Taking points 4 and 5 together, we can readily see how Anselm believed that the two natures of Christ were advantageous to accomplish atonement.

Let's now journey into the details to see why Anselm declares that Jesus must be both God and man to die for our sins. In book 1, chapter 5, Anselm argues that God could have created a new race of man to bring salvation but that would not be effective for that race of humans would just be superior to the Adamic race of humans.[12] Later, in book 2, chapter 8, Anselm argues that a new man of a new race would actually not be able to make satisfaction for the race of humans following Adam, because the debt must be paid by someone within the race of offenders.[13] So the savior could not be simply a human being created like Adam was, without original sin. In the same chapter, Anselm interrogates four possibilities for this mediator to arise: without man or woman (as with Adam, which he has already argued is impossible for two reasons), with both man and woman (as with all humans besides Adam and Eve), by man

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[10] Some have characterized this as an "infinite debt" but that actually goes a little further than what Anselm literally says.

[11] For an extensive critique of PSA from a Biblical Unitarian perspective, see Kevin George, *Atonement and Reconciliation: A Search for the Original Meaning, Contrasted with Penal Substitutionary Atonement*, (self-pub., 2023).

[12] Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo,* trans. Sidney Norton Deane (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1903), book 1, chap. 5, accessed August 13, 2026, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Cur_Deus_Homo.

[13] Ibid, book 2, chapter 8.

alone (as with Eve), and by woman alone (which was not accomplished before Jesus in the womb of Mary). Anselm thus concludes:

> Wherefore, in order to show that this last mode also under his power, and was reserved for this very purpose, what more fitting than that he should take that man whose origin we are seeking from a woman without a man? Now whether it be more worthy that he be born of a virgin, or one not a virgin, we need not discuss, but must affirm, beyond all doubt, that the God-man should be born of a virgin.[14]

Anselm argues that the redeemer must be a specific type of human, one from the seed of Adam on his mother's side, in order to fit the requirements of atonement. Jesus being born of a virgin (Mary) allows him to belong to Adam's race while avoiding ordinary human generation and the implications of original sin.

But this isn't everything that Anselm believes about the redeemer. Anselm thinks that the redeemer also must be fully divine. Why does he believe this? Recall that Anselm believes that we all owe God perfect obedience. Anything less than perfect obedience results in a debt owed to God. This is why, for Anselm, satisfaction requires more than just God merely forgiving the debt. Since we already owe God perfect obedience, any lapse through sin incurs a debt. And even perfect obedience going forward through repentance does not pay that obligation. This leads ultimately to the conclusion that there is a remarkable amount of sin debt from all of the humans throughout all time. How do you pay such a large debt? In book 2, chapter 6, Anselm argues alongside his dialogue partner Boso:

> Anselm. But this cannot be effected, except the price paid to God for the sin of man be something greater than all the universe besides God.
>
> Boso. So it appears.
>
> Anselm. Moreover, it is necessary that he who can give God anything of his own which is more valuable than all things in the possession of God, must be greater than all else but God himself.
>
> Boso. I cannot deny it.
>
> Anselm. *Therefore none but God can make this satisfaction.*
>
> Boso. So it appears.
>
> Anselm. *But none but a man ought to do this, otherwise man does not make the satisfaction.*
>
> Boso. Nothing seems more just.
>
> Anselm. If it be necessary, therefore, as it appears, that the heavenly kingdom be made up of men, and this cannot be effected unless the aforesaid satisfaction be made,

[14] Ibid.

> which none but God can make and none but man ought to make, *it is necessary for the God-man to make it.*[15]

Thus, for Anselm, the one to make atonement or satisfaction has to be the God-man. Fully God to pay the price of debt and fully man to justly pay for his own race.

Answering Anselm's Arguments using Logic

Brilliant for its time and in its context, there are many problems with Anselm's work from a modern perspective. Modern Christians don't share the same beliefs about forgiveness that Anselm does. In particular, Robin Collins brutally critiques Anselm in his paper "Understanding Atonement." First, the nature of God, as revealed in the Bible, seems to indicate that God can simply forgive people on any grounds that he desires, including the sacrificial system of the Mosaic covenant or repentance and forgiveness post-cross. Second, Collins pushes back on Anselm's theory that only God can pay the price required by God, since if God the Son died to pay back God the Father, who will pay back God the Son for the same debt that was owed him (since he is fully God like the Father is)? In this case, isn't the Son still forgiving on the basis of mercy anyways? If that's the case, it's easy to wonder why the Father couldn't just do that from the beginning.[16]

Collins' Trinitarian grounded objections aside, there's more to critique in Anselm's view. Perhaps the biggest objection to Anselm's argument is to take his conclusions at face value and argue them to absurdity. How can Jesus be fully God and fully man? How can Jesus both be immortal and die for our sins? How can Jesus be both tempted to sin and impervious? Anselm takes this objection incredibly seriously, bringing it up on multiple occasions:

> For we affirm that the Divine nature is beyond doubt impassible, and that God cannot at all be brought down from his exaltation, nor toil in anything which he wishes to effect. But we say that the Lord Jesus Christ is very God and very man, one person in two natures, and two natures in one person. When, therefore, we speak of God as enduring any humiliation or infirmity, we do not refer to the majesty of that nature, which cannot suffer; but to the feebleness of the human constitution which he assumed.[17]

In Anselm's view, like many Trinitarians, when we speak of Jesus dying, being tired, being hungry, or experiencing temptation, it's the human nature we're talking about, not the divine

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[15] Ibid, book 2, chapter 6, emphasis added.

[16] Collins, "Understanding Atonement." Interestingly, Collins reaches a conclusion similar to Anselm — that the divinity of Christ is critical to atonement — but he arrives there through a different atonement mechanism (participatory atonement instead of satisfaction).

[17] *Cur Deus Homo*, book 1, chapter 8.

nature.[18] In classical Trinitarian theology, the person of the Son dies with the added qualification "according to his human nature," while the divine nature remains immortal and impassible. And consequently, I believe that the Trinitarian atonement theories offer less than what the Biblical Unitarian atonement theories offer: a human nature is necessarily less than a full human person. So ironically, in the pursuit of showing the necessity of the incarnation for atonement, Anselm actually crucially defeats his own argument. If a large debt requires a large payment, how does the death of a human nature, even a perfect one, satisfy that payment?

A Trinitarian might respond that the person being offered up is still the divine Son. But the question remains: if the divine nature doesn't experience any changes or suffering in that nature, in what sense does the divine identity increase the metaphysical value of the sacrifice? The Trinitarian response shifts focus from the nature actually suffering to the person who makes the offering. But this raises another issue: why should the divine identity of the person of Christ make his human death a greater sacrifice if the divine nature is incapable of suffering, loss, and death? If the value of the sacrifice is found in what is actually lost, then the divine nature has lost exactly nothing. If the value of the sacrifice is dependent upon the person absent from any suffering (or experiencing of wrath, on PSA), then the Trinitarian has to explain both how this works philosophically and how it can be justified biblically. In contrast, one could argue that a simple human person has another advantage to the God-man — the obedience and sacrifice necessary to live a sinless life and die on the cross is much more impressive for a human person than for the God-man.

Interestingly, Anselm spends a great deal of time trying to shore up the Trinitarian aspect of his argument. On multiple occasions, Anselm discusses objections relating to this apparent contradiction. He even argues that the height of omnipotence is revealed in the death of the Son.[19] So how can Jesus both be tempted and not be tempted? Anselm tries to resolve these contradictions using a distinction between ability and desire. For example, he proposes the following in relation to Jesus growing in wisdom and favor with God in Luke 2:

> This may be understood also in the same way as that passage in which it is said that our Lord increased in wisdom, and in favor with God; not that this was really the case, *but that he deported himself as if it were so*.[20]

Anselm interprets Luke 2:52 as describing Christ's outward human manifestation in contrast with the all-wise divine nature also contained within Christ. So it suffices for Anselm that Jesus

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[18] Trinitarians vary on how this is communicated. Some speak this frankly about two natures. Others lean on the *communicatio idiomatum*. I return to the more nuanced Trinitarian view of this at the end of the paper.

[19] *Cur Deus Homo*, book 1, chapter 9 and book 2, chapter 11.

[20] Ibid*,* emphasis added.

acted like he could grow in wisdom and favor with God, as if he were an obedient human being. Jesus's desire was to show an example of faith to others, and that's why the scripture could be recorded this way. This is not a compelling argument at all. Later Anselm returns to this line of thinking:

> All power follows the will. For, when I say that I can speak or walk, it is understood, if I choose. For, if the will be not implied as acting, there is no power, but only necessity. For, when I say that I can be dragged or bound unwillingly, this is not my power, but necessity and the power of another; since I am able to be dragged or bound in no other sense than this, that another can drag or bind me. So we can say of Christ, that he could lie, so long as we understand, if he chose to do so. And, since he could not lie unwillingly and could not wish to lie, none the less can it be said that he could not lie. *So in this way it is both true that he could and could not lie.*[21]

Anselm is equivocating on the definition of the word "can" by saying, "Theoretically, Jesus could lie, he just never wanted to because of his divine nature. So he could have lied but never would have." But this is a distinction without a difference. My wife is physically capable of doing a belly flop into a pool, but I can assure you that she will never freely choose to do that. I would not say that "My wife cannot do a belly flop." That would be a misunderstanding of the word "can." Either my wife can physically do a belly flop or not. Either Jesus can lie or not. And Anselm does not really resolve this problem, despite his attention to the problem.

Answering Anselm's Arguments using Scripture

How well do Anselm's arguments and conclusions reflect scripture? First, it is important to note briefly that there are many reasons to disbelieve in the Trinity and the deity of Christ.[22] Notwithstanding that, the Bible never explicitly states that Jesus had to be God to die for our sins, much less Anselm's claims about the remarkable debt of sin and God's inability to simply forgive on whatever basis he decides. In fact, the opposite is true. The sacrificial system under the Mosaic covenant assumes that God can provide forgiveness and atonement disproportionate to the amount of sin. To give one simple example, the sacrifice required on the Day of Atonement for the entire nation of Israel was a bull and two goats: the bull to atone for the sins of the high priest, the first goat for a sin offering for the people, and the scapegoat to be sent into the wilderness as a symbol of God taking the sins of the people away. No one would argue that this was a large sacrifice for a large amount of sin, and yet this is the pattern that God gave in the Law of Moses.

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[21] Ibid*,* book 2, chapter 10*,* emphasis added.

[22] In particular, Dale Tuggy offers 20 reasons why the New Testament supports a Biblical Unitarian position in his chapter "New Testament Theology is Unitarian" in *One God, Three Persons, Four Views: A Biblical, Theological, and Philosophical Dialogue on the Doctrine of the Trinity* edited by C.A. McIntosh, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024). Or see Tuggy, *Monotheism, Heresy, and the Bible: Essays on Biblical Unitarianism* (Nashville, TN: Theophilus Press, 2026).

Perhaps more importantly, the relevant New Testament passages portray a completely different set of assumptions and arguments about atonement and the role of Jesus's nature in that atoning sacrifice. Here are two critical examples:

> Romans 5:12-21 (ESV)
> 12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned-- 13 for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. 14 Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. 15 But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. 16 And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. 17 For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. 18 Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. 19 For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. 20 Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, 21 so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.
>
> 1 Timothy 2:5 (ESV)
> For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,

The letter to the Romans is the place we would expect to find a fully developed doctrine of atonement, if one were to exist in the New Testament. First, the original audience was a church in a major city (Rome) that Paul himself did not plant. That's why Paul labors over the doctrinal aspect of the faith in such great detail. In the opening of this letter, Paul notably identifies God as the Father and Jesus as a descendant of David. In Romans 5, Paul has a chance to tell that church that Jesus needs to be God or have a divine nature in order to pay for our sins. This seems like the right moment to tell that church that Jesus has two natures. But instead, Paul leans heavily on the comparison of Jesus to Adam. Like Adam was a simple human comprised of a solely human nature, so too the atonement was made by a man. In particular, the Greek word *anthrōpos* (translated "man" or "men") appears several times, and it refers to Jesus specifically in verse 15. Of course, the ESV translators (and many other translators of this passage) have added additional English instances of the words "man" or "men" to fit the Greek grammar of the passage, which implies those words at various points. Instead of arguing that Jesus must be God to die for our sins, Paul compares Jesus to Adam. Romans 5 gives us a strong example of a rich, biblical text on atonement that notably does not appeal to the divinity of Jesus at all and instead focuses on Jesus's humanity.

This leads us to the verse in 1 Timothy, which was written by Paul to his former traveling companion Timothy. This is a much briefer treatment of the situation, which makes sense given the fact that Timothy heard Paul teach many times. Timothy knew what Paul believed on a number of topics and was a named collaborator on several New Testament letters. Timothy did not need a Romans-length doctrinal dissertation on the theology of atonement. And here, we get one verse, where Paul has the ability to say precisely what Anselm and others have said: "There is one God, eternally expressed in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and one mediator from among the Trinity to mediate between the Triune God and man, the God-man Jesus Christ." And yet, that is precisely not what Paul says. Just like in Romans, Paul identifies God as the Father in the opening words of the letter. And here in chapter 2, Paul succinctly tells us that the mediator between God and humanity is a human being, Jesus Christ. Again, the Greek word *anthrōpos* governs the nature of our savior.

Of course, these aren't the only sections in scripture that deal with Christ's atoning work on the cross. Various sections of scripture describe Jesus's death as necessary for a sacrifice for sins, giving his life as a ransom, reconciling us back to God, among other important theological points. Common to all of these is the importance of Jesus's death and resurrection, two of the fundamental truth claims of Christianity (we will return to Jesus's death at the end of the paper). Notably absent from all of these sections is any claim of Jesus having two natures or even having a divine nature, much less the divine nature being necessary to procure our atonement and redemption.

Robin Collins' "Understanding Atonement"

Even if we can dismiss Anselm's satisfaction theory and PSA, there are other Trinitarian atonement theories that are necessarily Trinitarian; that is, they require Jesus to be God in order to satisfy the requirements of their theory. One of the more interesting theories along those lines is found in a paper written by Christian philosopher Robin Collins called "Understanding Atonement: A New and Orthodox Theory." Before Collins gives his own theory, he explains the history of different common atonement theories before heavily critiquing both satisfaction and penal theories. Collins then proposes his unique view, which he coins as the Incarnational theory of atonement. Here are the key characteristics of Collins' view:

1. Atonement works through unity with Christ.
2. Unity with Christ and an intimate relationship with him are found throughout scripture, notably in husbandry metaphors like the vine and branches in John 15.
3. God's life cannot be grafted into something alien to his life, just as an apple tree branch could not be grafted into a horse.

4. In order to atone for our sins, God must share in what Collins calls “our life situation,” not just limiting himself to human abilities, but really experiencing human life, especially the harsher, more negative aspects of human life.

5. Therefore, in order for God’s self to be alien from our selves and to unite us with God, a person of the Trinity had to become incarnate and secure our atonement.

As Collins himself admits, the key claim of his theory is claim number 3, which is unique to his atonement theory. To support this claim, Collins gives an example from God’s love, which Collins takes to be “the essence of God’s nature.”[23] Here is how Collins defends his argument:

> Let's start by considering that the Book of 1 John seems to suggest that the love of God is not just another attribute of God but is the essence of God's nature. Then think about the fact that if God's love is at the heart of God's life, it makes sense that we must share in his love in order to share in his life (as with the vine on the branches). But this sharing must be conceived in the right way. When God gives us his love, it cannot be as though God takes some love from his own being, puts it in a bag, and then hands it to us. *Rather, if God's love is really inseparable from God himself, then when we partake of God's love, we literally partake of God, for as 1 John 4:8 says, God is love.* Apart from Christ's life and death, however, the love of God as it exists between the members of the Trinity is a love that acts from a standpoint of infinity, invulnerability and total acceptance. When, for instance, the Father expresses love for the Holy Spirit, the Father does not risk being rejected, ridiculed, or taken advantage of. As wonderful as this sort of love is, therefore, it is not the sort of love that at present we can significantly share in or assimilate into our life-situation. For at least on earth, our love is a risky affair: it must operate from the standpoint of finitude, vulnerability, and to some extent alienation from God, ourselves, and others. Moreover, it must even continue to love in the face of unjust persecution.[24]

For Collins, this is why Jesus had to be both divine and human. Jesus had to be capable of partaking in the true nature of God (through perfect love) and also experience love in all of its facets in human form. Collins concludes:

> According to this account, therefore, we are saved from our sin and partake in Christ's resurrection life by identifying with, and sharing in, Christ's perfect love toward God and others which was demonstrated in his death on the Cross.[25]

In order to atone for our sins, Jesus had to be fully God. For us to be saved, we also need to share in Christ’s perfect love towards God and others as demonstrated on the cross.

Answering Collins’ Theory

Collins’ theory is a remarkable improvement on Anselm’s satisfaction theory and PSA. Yet while I commend Collins for his efforts on making a more comprehensively logical and biblical theory, I believe his critical assumption is false for both logical and biblical reasons.

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[23] Collins, “Understanding Atonement.”

[24] Ibid*,* italics added for emphasis.

[25] Ibid*.*

Collins' key assumption is that "God's life cannot be grafted into something alien to his life, just as an apple tree branch could not be grafted into a horse." What are the logical problems with this assertion? Regardless of whether Jesus is God in the highest sense or not, Collins eventually concludes that we share life with God through Jesus. However, Collins does not argue that the characteristics of our lives actually change to the point of full divinity. Being united with Christ, even on Collins' view, does not change our metaphysical natures. Thus, Collins needs to explain what it means for humans to participate in God's life while remaining metaphysically distinct from God.[26] I can see how a two-natured Jesus can participate in love both purely divine and incorruptibly human, but not how we can participate in the same life of God without a metaphysical change. In other words, Collins seems to be requiring something metaphysical of Jesus as the bridge to atonement that he isn't requiring of our participation in the divine nature. If we can participate in union with Christ without a metaphysical change, then why does his atonement theory hinge on Jesus's metaphysical difference from a human being?

Interestingly enough, I actually believe the Bible gives us an answer that resolves both the problem of God's life being grafted in and how participation in the life of God can happen without incarnation, and that is through the indwelling of the holy spirit. After all, the phrase "God is love" is not the only "God is" statement in the Bible.

> John 4:24 (ESV)
> "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

Jesus's teaching here implicitly assumes that humanity can worship God through or in the spirit. And we find this throughout the scriptures — men and women participating in the life of God through the spirit. Even Jesus himself participated in that life of God through the spirit.

> Acts 10:38 (ESV)
> how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

And Collins' reading of John 15 underemphasizes the immediate context where Jesus is describing to his disciples that participating in God's life is found in the spirit of God.

> John 14:16-17 (ESV)
> 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever,
> 17 even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.
>
> John 15:26 (ESV)

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[26] Interestingly, on this point I think Collins may be influenced by earlier thinkers like Irenaeus and Athanasius. Many of the early church fathers, including Irenaeus and Athanasius, were open to the idea that humans become more godlike in the resurrection or eternal life (a doctrine called *theosis*). While *theosis* might solve Collins' problem here, he doesn't seem keen to advance it.

> 26 "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.
>
> John 16:13 (ESV) 13 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

Finally, the spirit of God is part of the metaphysical change that happens at conversion, allowing us to follow Jesus and partake in the love of God.[27] Collins assumes that participation in God's life requires Jesus to be a God-man, but scripture repeatedly describes human participation in God's life through the spirit of God. We can rightfully reject this crucial claim of Collins' theory.

The Problem with Atonement Theories that Require the Deity of Christ

This brings us to the final objection to any atonement theory that says Jesus must be God to die for our sins: what do we do about the death of Jesus? Here, I have several objections. First, there is no basis to suggest that God can die. In fact, scripture states quite strongly that God is immortal[28] and that Jesus died. Trinitarian Christology therefore must explain how the same person can be both genuinely immortal as God and dead as man.

Second, it is fair to wonder if such a sacrifice is greater than the death of a genuine human person. On orthodox Trinitarianism, the divine nature of Jesus does not die. Only Jesus's human body (or perhaps his human nature, depending on the Trinitarian) dies. I would argue that the sacrifice of a perfect human being is greater than the sacrifice of a perfect human nature, much less a perfect human body. Thus, the Biblical Unitarian version of Jesus as a perfect man and antitype to Adam can both effect salvation and provide an actually greater sacrifice for sins. In other words, I am not just saying "no" to the question at hand in this paper, but rather, I am suggesting that Jesus must be a perfect human to atone for our sins and that this is, in fact, a greater sacrifice than a human nature.

Some Trinitarians respond by appealing to the *communicatio idiomatum*, the doctrine that the two natures of Jesus are united in the one person and that all properties belonging to either nature can be predicated of the person. For many Trinitarians, the solution is to define death as the separation of Jesus's soul from his body, something that certainly a God-man

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[27] John 3:5-8, Romans 8:9-11, Romans 8:14-16, Romans 8:23, Romans 8:29, 1 Corinthians 3:16, 1 Corinthians 6:17, 1 Corinthians 6:19, 1 Corinthians 12:13, 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, 2 Corinthians 5:5, Galatians 4:6, Galatians 5:22-23, Ephesians 1:13-14, Titus 3:5-6, and 2 Peter 1:3-4.

[28] As Tuggy argues in *Monotheism, Heresy, and the Bible*, 1 Timothy 6:16 suggests that the Father alone has essential immortality (see page 179). This is a strong argument both against the Trinity (since the Holy Spirit apparently doesn't have essential immortality) and the deity of Jesus.

could experience. In this case, the soul-ish part of Jesus would of course contain the divine nature and the soul of his human nature. On this view, only the body of Jesus experienced the cessation of activity. My concern with this view is purely biblical. While it is probably true that aspects of the Trinitarian doctrine can be salvaged with these gymnastics, you simply will not find these beliefs explicated in scripture. The Bible simply declares that Jesus died and then was raised from the dead by God.[29] When Trinitarians look for a biblical way to describe the eternal nature of Jesus, they sometimes pick the title "Son." And yet, the Bible is clear that the Son died (Romans 5:10).[30] The ability for Trinitarians to defend their claims hinges on non-biblical language from later creeds, a specific doctrine of the intermediate state of the dead,[31] and a specific doctrine the eternality of the human soul,[32] all of which are open to question.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined Christian thinking from the 200s to recent times, examine the question: "does Jesus have to be God in order to die for our sins?" What we have found is that traditional Trinitarian speculations fall short in proving that atonement requires Jesus to be fully God and fully man. Instead, I argue that the biblical evidence presents Jesus's humanity as sufficient for atonement. Jesus serves as the antitype to Adam, the first human, in our redemption. And when considering the philosophical implications of the death of Jesus, we further concluded that the death of a full human person is of greater metaphysical value than the death of a human body or human nature. So does Jesus have to be God in order to die for our sins? No, absolutely not!

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[29] This is consistent with either soul sleep or other views of the intermediate state.

[30] Trinitarian apologist Michael Brown famously said, "The Son didn't die!" in his debate with Dale Tuggy. Dale Tuggy and Michael Brown, "Is the God of the Bible the Father Alone?," filmed January 11, 2019, in Concord, NC, YouTube video, 1:12:10, accessed August 14, 2026, https://youtu.be/Oi300_FvFz0?si=M2g8B8zGkhFl90By.

[31] For a treatment of the condition of the dead, see Dustin Smith, *A Systematic Theology of the Early Church,* ed. J. Jeffery Fletcher and Scott A. Deane (Boise, ID: Integrity Syndicate, 2025), pages 108-119.

[32] For a treatment on the history of this belief, see Sean Finnegan, *Kingdom Journey: A Call to Recover the Central Theme of Scripture*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2023), pages 67-81.

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