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Towards a relational and trinitarian theology of atonement

David H. McIlroy

David H. McIlroy is a practising barrister, Visiting Lecturer in Law at SOAS, University of London and a Research Student at Spurgeon's College, London.

Key words: trinitarian, relational, atonement, penal substitution, love, law, judgment, representative, substitute.

I. Introduction

Jürgen Moltmann claims that '... the theology of the cross must be the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Trinity must be the theology of the cross, because otherwise the human, crucified God cannot be fully perceived.'¹ This claim is undoubtedly correct, although the development of a trinitarian theology of the cross and a cruci-centric theology of the Trinity does not require one to adopt Moltmann's own particular (not to say peculiar) view of the matter. Nonetheless, the Church was driven to the conclusions of Nicea and Chalcedon in order to make sense of the saving events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. A key reason for having a doctrine of the Trinity is because of the light such a doctrine sheds on the mystery of the cross. As Roger Forster says in his recent book, 'our very grasp of the incarnation and atonement depends upon a Trinitarian God.'²

This paper seeks to argue that precisely because the doctrine of the Trinity was explored by the Church in order to make sense of the atoning death of God incarnate, a proper understanding of the Trinity provides indispensable illumination of the reasons why Christ died.

The particular approach to the Trinity which is being explored in current theology is that of the Trinity as 'Persons-in-Relation'. This relational model of the Trinity has the significant merit of giving full weight to the centrality of love in the biblical picture of God and of our relationship with him.

However, what is revealed in Scripture is that relationships involve obligations, and the history of humanity's relationship with the living, triune God is one of incorrigible violations of our obligations to him. Developing a relational perspective on the Fall and on God's law enables the appreciation of the work of

1 J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* 2nd edn. (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1973) ET by R. A Wilson and J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1974, 2001), 249; T. Chester *Delighting in the Trinity: Just why are Father, Son and Spirit such good news?* (Oxford: Monarch, 2005), 57.

2 R. Forster, *Trinity: Song and Dance God* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), 92; see also Chester, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 14, 154.

Jesus Christ the obedient man and the self-substituting God, and the role of the Holy Spirit in God's work of atonement and reconciliation.

II. The basis for evangelical unity on the atoning work of the triune God

Roger Forster expresses incredulity that none of the official creeds of the Church or the major Confessions of Faith (until the 2005 revision of the Evangelical Alliance Basis of Faith) declares in plain terms the central Christian truth that God is love (1 John 4:16).³ The 2005 Basis of Faith begins by expressing belief in:

1. The one true God who lives eternally in three persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

After this trinitarian declaration of intent, the Basis of Faith announces the acts of this triune God, proclaiming:

2. The love, grace and sovereignty of God in creating, sustaining, ruling, redeeming and judging the world.

The Basis of Faith goes on to talk in its sixth clause of 'The atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross: dying in our place, paying the price of sin and defeating evil, so reconciling us with God.'

The mainstream evangelical understanding of this clause is that it necessarily implies a doctrine of penal substitution. This doctrine, or its bastardized versions, is challenged by some who advance a relational model of the Trinity. The thesis of this paper is that while an understanding of the doctrine of the atonement from a relational perspective might place the emphasis differently from traditional presentations of the doctrine of penal substitution, it does not necessitate the abandonment of the doctrine. On the contrary, it is precisely because God is three Persons-in-Relation united in purpose to reconcile the world to himself that the atonement is the awesome event that it is. Furthermore, it is precisely because God's purpose for humanity was that we should be in living relationship with him that sin is of the enormity that it is because it amounts to the repudiation of our obligations, and hence of our relationship, with him.

III. The relational triune God and his creation

The doctrine of the Trinity secures particular features of the Christian doctrine of God. Because God is the loving harmony of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Christians can be confident that 'God is love'. That God is fundamentally triune reveals that harmonious relationships are of the essence of his being. The love of God is guaranteed to be everlasting (Jer. 31:3), because God is love. God reveals himself in the Old Testament to be the living God (Ex. 3:14; Jer. 10:10).⁴ The New Testament reveals in what his inner life consists.

3 Forster, *Trinity*, xvii-xviii, 89.

4 Forster, *Trinity*, 21.

A key theological question is the relationship of this triune God to his creation. The danger with a transcendent God is that he becomes too aloof, too uncaring, to be an attractive object of human love. In search of a God who is involved in his creation, Jürgen Moltmann has talked of the holistic Spirit, who indwells creation in a panentheistic way.⁵ The problem with such a doctrine is that it makes God and creation co-dependent.

Rightly understood the doctrine of the Trinity teaches that, because God is not lonely, Christians can be confident that he does not *need* to create. The proper space between God and his creation is preserved by a doctrine of original grace, a doctrine which distinguishes between the Father's begetting of his Son, which is inherent to God's being, and the creation of the world, which is a contingent act, freely willed by the triune God, who could have decided not to create but chose to do so. This act of creation was originated by the Father, but mediated by the Son and the Spirit, who acted as the Father's 'two hands'.⁶ Creation thus comes from the triune God and is sustained by the operations of the triune God.

Thomas Aquinas was aware of the need to maintain the transcendence of God (STL.27.1).⁷ He was very careful to draw distinctions between God and creation. God is not the Supreme Being, as if he is merely the greatest in a chain of creatures. He is something other than his creatures.⁸ For Thomas, a key feature of God's otherness is that he alone is constituted by the Persons of the Godhead in relationship with one another (STL.29.4; I.28.2).⁹ In other words, in God alone does relationship equate to being without remainder. That point in Aquinas's thought is a key one. If God alone is his triune relationships without remainder,

5 J. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1991) ET by M. Kohl (London: SCM, 1992), xiii, 10, 34, 37, 46, 55, 82; *Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1980), ET by M. Kohl (London: SCM, 1981), 113.

6 An image which comes originally from Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV.Preface.4; IV.xx.1.

7 Aquinas has often been misrepresented. Whereas the standard English-language view of Thomas is that he has little interest in either the cross of Christ or the doctrine of the Trinity, Thomas wrote in 1265 that 'The Christian faith consists above all in the confession of the Holy Trinity, and it glories especially in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ': *De articulis fidei et ecclesiae sacramentis, ad Archiepiscopum Panormitanum* (Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1979), 42:207. Such a statement, as well as his high view of Scripture and ability as a biblical commentator, make him someone from whom evangelicals have much to learn as Norman Geisler points out: *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991).

8 The importance of this for understanding Aquinas' often subtle thought was reiterated by C. A. Franks in 'The Simplicity of the Living God: Aquinas, Barth and Some Philosophers', *Modern Theology* 21.2 (2005), 275-300. See also F. Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 43. It is Duns Scotus who introduces the idea of a univocal concept of 'being'.

9 A. Nichols, *Discovering Aquinas: An Introduction to his Life, Work and Influence* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2002), 68-69; Kerr, *After Aquinas*, 198.

then human beings are not solely constituted by our relationships. We may not be who we are without our relationships; they may be partially constitutive of us, but our being is also something which we have from God.

That human beings are made in the image of this triune God indicates that relationships are important to our being. We could not exist other than because God maintains us in being, and so we are dependent on our relationship to him. It is also given to us to be situated within creation, on the earth, at a particular time and place in history, and so we are dependent on our relationship to the created order. We also are created into a particular family and culture, and however much we may choose for ourselves when we are grown the relationships we wish to cultivate, the major relationships in our youth are simply given to us. It may not be an exaggeration to talk of relationships as ontological for human being, provided that the fact that we are dependent on God's relationship to us is placed in first position. God grants to us a distinct identity, constituted in part by the human relations which we are given, which we cultivate, which we choose and which we enjoy. However, over and above those human relationships it is given to us by God.

The Bible reveals that the triune God who did not have to create, is committed to the creation he has made. In Jeremiah 9:24 he declares: 'I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth' (NRSV). The incarnation is the culmination of God's actions of steadfast love (*hesed*) towards His creation. As I.H. Marshall says: "The God of the Bible... is fundamentally holy and loving, and both of these attributes are relational: they find expression in love towards his creation and yet also judgment and wrath when that creation is spoilt by sin."¹⁰

Orthodox Christianity not only affirms that the triune God is other than his creation, it also affirms that in the mystery of the Incarnation, God the Son entered into his creation as a man. The proper connectedness between God and his creation is preserved by a recognition that God has the capacity, because he is omnipotent, to become that which he is not, to assume humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Chalcedonian Two-Natures Christology offers a sophisticated account of the unity of the person of Jesus Christ who is fully God and fully man.

1. The Fall in relational perspective

The Genesis account tells of Adam and Eve enjoying a relationship of fellowship with God, of harmony with creation and of delight in each other. But in the Garden there was a tree, whose fruit God had forbidden. God had made clear that eating from this tree carried a penalty: that of death (Gen. 2:17).

The picture provided in Genesis illustrates something fundamental about relationships. Relationships impose responsibilities. Our apprehension of

10 I. H. Marshall, 'The Theology of the Atonement' in D. J. Tidball, D. Hilborn and J. Thacker (eds.), *The Atonement Debate* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

those responsibilities may be culturally conditioned. Often it is appropriate to talk about 'expectations', but those expectations are inchoate or incompletely defined rules. Although rules do not exhaust relationships; they are an indispensable foundation. The relationship between husband and wife entails the responsibility of sexual fidelity, which can be expressed as the rule 'Do not commit adultery'. The relationship between parent and young child entails the responsibility on the part of the child of obedience and on the part of the parent of care, provision, protection, and education. It may be impossible to produce an exhaustive list of the rules accompanying a particular relationship but that observation does not alter the general proposition that relationships impose responsibilities,¹¹ the most serious of which can be expressed in rule-form.

In biblical terms, the fact that relationships involve obligations is expressed through the concept of 'covenant'. The Hebrew word for 'covenant' (*berit*) can refer to political treaties or to marriage, and either or both of those ideas are the inspiration for its application to the relationship between God and his people.¹² In all cases, 'the essence of the covenant is to be found in faithfulness'¹³ to the other party to it. In marriage, this included sexual fidelity. In political arrangements, this included compliance with the terms of the treaty.

The biblical covenants are important because in them God commits himself to his creation and his people, promising to act in certain ways towards them. He also sets out what he requires of his people. Hetty Lalleman says: 'In the commandments and laws of the Torah we can discover what sort of life God wants people to live. Both in its stories and in the laws the Torah shows how God wants to relate to people. The laws and commands show us what a life with God as King looks like.'¹⁴ The *Torah* was not a means of getting into relationship with God; it was a description of what it meant to live in right relationship with God. Chris Wright sums up the point succinctly: 'righteousness and justice in Old Testament thought are not abstract ideas. They are highly personal and relational terms.'¹⁵

A focus on relationships, far from rendering our sinfulness mere actions contrary to an impersonal created order, highlights their quality as law-breaking, covenant-breaking and death-dealing moral choices. The moral law is nothing other than the expression of the character of the living, relational, triune God. Because of who he is, because he has created us to be in relationship with one another and with him he has given us a framework for right living. When we sin, we violate the responsibilities inherent in our relationships.

11 H. Lalleman, *Celebrating the Law: Rethinking Old Testament Ethics* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), 19-20; H. Taylor, *Human Rights: Its Culture and Moral Confusions* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2004), 58.

12 E. Lucas, *Ezekiel: The People's Bible Commentary* (Oxford: BRF, 2002), 129.

13 Lucas, *Ezekiel* 129.

14 Lalleman, *Celebrating the Law?*, 24.

15 C. J. H. Wright, *Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics* (Leicester: IVP, 1983), 135.

For Adam and Eve, the rule-form 'Do not eat the fruit of the forbidden tree' was symbolic of their obedience to the command of God as befitted their relationship as creatures to a good creator, in parallel to the rule-form 'Do not commit adultery' which symbolises the relationship of fidelity between husband and wife. To put it simply, because we are human beings, our relationship to God carries with it the obligation of obedience to God. The command of God was a good command, given by a loving God, who wanted the best for his creation, who wanted to enjoy a right relationship with the human race that he had made.

The primeval moment of lawbreaking can be understood as a decision to reject that relationship, and such a move makes God's response more not less comprehensible. Denial of our relationship to God is expressed in disobedience to his commands. Human sinfulness is not just regarded by God as breaches of his laws, as if he were at one step removed from his laws, but as rebellion against him personally (Jer. 3:13, 4:17; 15:6; Ezek. 2:3). Another relational way of describing the Fall is as humanity's rejection of its given role in creation and its attempt to usurp another role – the role of God.¹⁶ Again this is a repudiation of our proper relationship to him.

In Genesis 2:17, God tells Adam '... you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.' Is that warning of death an active sanction imposed by God or a mere natural consequence? If the former, then God is actively and personally involved in pronouncing and enforcing the penalty for sin. If the latter, then he stands at one remove from the process, albeit that it is a process which he has ordained.

As will be argued below, the overwhelming message of Scripture is that God is personally involved in punishing sin. As Mike Ovey argues persuasively, the narrative of Genesis 3 itself shows God personally involved in giving judgment following the disobedience to the command given in Genesis 2:17. He pronounces the curses in Gen. 3:14, 17. He links pain with childbirth and disorder in human relationships (Gen. 3:16). By his word, humanity is now in an impaired relation to the earth (Gen. 3:17) and the penalty of death is affirmed (Gen. 3:19). In all of this, God acts personally and judicially.¹⁷

Dewi Hughes says this:

The primary result of Adam and Eve's sin was the breakdown in their relationship with God. Inevitably this led to dysfunction in their relation with each other. It also led to breakdown in their relationship with the rest of the created order.¹⁸

Without speculating on the question of whether death was present in the

16 R. Black, *Christian Moral Realism: Natural Law, Narrative, Virtue and the Gospel* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 120.

17 M. Ovey, 'The Cross, Creation and the Human Predicament' in D. Peterson (ed.), *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 112.

18 D. Hughes, *God of the Poor* (Carlisle: OM Publishing, 1998), 301.

created order before humanity's fall, Hughes is right to assert that 'Nature is a mirror of humanity's spiritual state. As humanity moves away from God nature reflects this by becoming a place of dysfunction, decay and death.'¹⁹ Conversely, Romans 8:19 states that 'the creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed'. The renewal of creation is attendant upon the restoration of humanity.

Nonetheless, by the grace of God, the penalty of physical death did not follow immediately. Although they were out of fellowship with God, God maintained his love towards Adam and Eve. He continued to maintain them in existence, to provide for them and to watch over them. Even Cain was protected by God, who acted graciously towards him (Gen. 4:10-15). In other words, God continued to relate to human beings even though human beings had ceased to relate to him. It is only because God continues to relate to us that we are sustained in being.

However, although sustained in being by God, because of their rejection of God, human beings were spiritually dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 2:13). To be out of relationship with the living God is to be, in an important sense, dead. The Bible is nonetheless clear that God has not abandoned human beings who have rejected him but seeks, through the operations of his Holy Spirit, to draw them back to himself.

For Adam's original sin the penalty of death, of eternal separation from God, was imposed. Since that moment, the penalty has been suspended over the heads of all humankind.²⁰ On each one of us the penalty of physical death is executed. But beyond this lies what Revelation calls the second death (Rev. 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8), that exclusion from the presence of God which is eternal. If God is the living God and to know him is to know life, then to reject him is to choose death.

2. God's law in relational perspective

The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England in its report *The Mystery of Salvation* criticises judicial theories of the atonement which 'have often pictured God's law, God's wrath, and human sin and guilt not as aspects of the relation between God and humanity, but as though they were actual objects or things that somehow had to be dealt with.'²¹ Given the overwhelming evidence for the use of the language of law, wrath, sin and guilt in the Bible, which will not be argued for but assumed in the present article, the solution surely lies in placing these concepts in a relational context.

While some commentators make Genesis foundational for a Christian inter-

19 Hughes, *God of the Poor*, 304.

20 This is true whether one understands Adam as our head in federal terms, or whether one sees original sin as hereditarily transmitted, or whether one sees Adam as 'everyman' describing the choices each one of us make. In relational terms, we are all genetically related to Adam, imprinted with his DNA.

21 *The Mystery of Salvation*, (London: Church House Publishing, 1995), 211.

pretation of the Old Testament, others focus on the Exodus. But even if this latter approach is taken, the same emphasis on law within the context of relationship emerges.

From Genesis 12, with the call of Abraham, we see God at work to create a people who would follow him, and whose example of righteous living would be an attractive demonstration of the love of God to the world around. Throughout the Bible the pattern is the same – God taking the initiative to restore the relationship of people to himself. The relationship of faith in God was to be demonstrated through obedience to God, most graphically illustrated in Genesis 22, where Abraham was called to sacrifice Isaac, only to find that God himself provided the lamb.

In the Exodus, at the moment of Passover, the issue of relationship with God was clearly at stake. Those who identified themselves with the God of Israel painted blood on their doorposts. Those who put their trust in the gods of Egypt did not.

The delivering actions of God on behalf of his people led him to call them to a life of obedience to commands given by Moses. Norman Anderson rightly stresses that 'it is essential to see the Mosaic law as a whole, and the Decalogue in particular, as the stipulations attached to a covenant originally made with Abraham, and renewed to Israel as a people redeemed by the Exodus from slavery in Egypt.'²²

Jesus' identification of the Two Great Commandments as being to 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind' and to 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Mt. 22:37-40, quoting Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18) as the hermeneutic keys to the Old Testament law places the whole of the Torah in a relational context.²³ It is relationships which are primary within the moral order. We are called to enjoy a wholehearted, intimate relationship with God.

The priority of relationships is put beyond doubt by an understanding of *tsedeqah* as a relational term. Gerhard von Rad says that 'There is absolutely no concept in the Old Testament with so central a significance for all the relationships of human life as that of [*tsedeqah*]. It is the standard not only for man's relationship to God, but also for his relationship to his fellows, reaching right down to... the animals and to his natural environment... for it embraces the whole of Israelite life.'²⁴

As Christopher Marshall rightly notes,

the Hebrew idea of righteousness is *comprehensively relational*... Right-

22 J. N. D. Anderson, *Freedom under Law* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1988), 105; see also W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1984, 2000), 91; G. Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1981, 1994), 61; Wright, *Living as the People of God*, 22.

23 Hughes, *God of the Poor*, 60.

24 G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (London, SCM, 1962), 2:370, 373.

eousness is, at heart, the fulfilment of the demands of a relationship whether this relationship is with other human beings or with God. For this reason, righteousness language frequently appears in covenant-making contexts, for 'covenant' was Israel's term for a committed relationship...

This applies pre-eminently to Israel's covenant with Yahweh... *Israel's righteousness* consists in exhibiting the ethical and religious conduct specified in the terms of the covenant... Law, covenant, and righteousness are thus interpenetrating concepts. To be righteous is to be faithful to the law of the covenant-keeping God and thus to treat fellow members of the covenant community with justice.²⁵

Michael Schluter's research into the biblical social vision led him to the same conclusion. When Jesus places the Two Great Love Commandments at the heart of the Law, he is making a profound statement. The purpose of the *Torah* was to show the people of God how to live in right relationships with one another and how to live in right relationship with God.²⁶ Conversely, to break the moral aspects of the *Torah* is to damage relationships. God's people's disobedience to him is portrayed as adultery.²⁷ It is a fundamental breach and rejection of their personal relationship with him.

3. *The personal nature of the judgment and deliverance of God*

The picture given in the Genesis stories is that the original judgment was personally given by God. In keeping with the fact that relationships are fundamental to his nature, God's actions in the world he has created and which has fallen are personal. The personal God who created the world personally, continues to govern and sustain it personally (Jer. 27:5). Views which see God merely as a clockmaker, who created regular patterns and courses down which events flow and thereafter retires to observe what he has set in train are sub-Christian.

Nor will it do to attribute God's actions in deliverance to personal interventions on his behalf whilst insisting that the judgments human beings experience are nothing other than the causal consequences of their sinful actions.²⁸ It is true to say that actions have consequences. As Paul writes in Galatians 6:7 'A man reaps what he sows.' (see also Hos. 8:7; 10:13). Often, we get what we deserve (Jer. 17:10). God never punishes capriciously. His judgments are always just and timely (Jer. 25:12-14; Lam. 3:39; Dan. 4:37). When it comes, judgment is in accordance with our deeds.²⁹ But the judgments are portrayed in the Bible as per-

25 C. D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 47. See also C. Townsend, 'An eye for an eye? The morality of punishment', *Cambridge Papers* 6.1 (1997).

26 M. Schluter, 'Relationism: pursuing a biblical vision for society', *Cambridge Papers* 6.4 (1997).

27 Jer. 3:6-9; Ezek. 16:15-58; 23:35-49; Hos. 1:2; 4:15.

28 Peterson, *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*, 45.

29 Ezek. 7:27; 16:43; 17:19; 23:35; 24:14; Hos. 4:9; 12:2; Obad. 15; Zech. 1:6; 1 Pet. 1:17; Rev. 2:23; 18:5-6; 22:12.

sonal actions of the triune God who is essentially personal (Jer. 25:31).

The Bible repeatedly presents the judgments of God as personal in nature. The list of references is too long to set out in full.³⁰ To say that the prophets were merely using anthropomorphic language as a shorthand for expressing the causal consequences of generations of heaped-up sin is to do a violence to the reading of Scripture. Using a different set of verses,³¹ Garry Williams argues that the Bible teaches that 'it is in a personal confrontation with God himself that sin is punished.'³²

However, there is an inscrutability about the workings of divine providence, as the Wisdom writers of the Old Testament observed. Given the fact that the sentence of death has been pronounced over all who have rejected a relationship with God, what needs to be accounted for is not that we often experience the consequences of our sin, but that we usually do not experience the full consequences of our sin. To use two outdated legal terms: our lives are forfeit before God; we are outlaws because we have by our actions placed ourselves outside the loving protection of the king.

What needs accounting for is not that there was a flood, but that God promised that he would not send another one (Gen. 9:11). It is not that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed for their sinfulness but that London and Bangkok have not been.³³ As Jesus pointed out, Sodom and Gomorrah are a warning but other cities, equally if not more deserving of a similar fate, have been spared.³⁴ Ezra realised that given the enormity of Israel's sin against God, its repeated violations of its covenant relationship with God, God had punished Israel less than its sins deserved (Ezra 9:13). That is the normal experience of human beings. There is a pattern of postponed punishment in the Old Testament which Garry Williams traces.³⁵ The explanation that the Bible gives is that God is patient.³⁶

30 It includes Lev. 26:21-39; Deut. 29:19-28; Neh. 9:26-27; Ps. 135:8-12; Isa. 65:6-7; Jer. 5:15; 6:6; 7:11-15; 8:12; 9:15-16; 11:10-11, 22-23; 12:14-17; 15:6-9; 16:10-13; 18:7-11; 19:3; 21:5, 13; 22:6-7; 24:19-20, 30-32; 29:21, 29-32; 31:28; 32:23, 42; 34:17-22; 35:17; 42:18; 43:2-14; 46:25-26; 48:12; 49-51; 52:3; Lam. 1:5, 12-15; 2-3; 4:11; Ezek. 5:7-7:27; 8:17-9:10; 11:8-21; 12:13-16; 13:13-23; 14:8-10; 16:27, 35-43; 17:19-21; 18:30-32; 21:1-5, 15-32; 22:1-4, 31; 23:22-35; 24:8-14; 25:4-17; 26:3, 7, 13-14; 28:6-7, 22-23; 29:1-21; 30:8-26; 31:10-11; 32:3-16; 33:27-29; 37:14-15; 38:21-23; 43:8; Dan. 9:12; Hos. 1:4-6; 2:3-13; 5:10-15; 8:5, 13-14; 9:9, 12; 10:10; 12:10; 13:7-11; Joel 2:25; 3:21; Amos 1:14-15; 3:2, 14-15; 8:9-10; Obad. 2, 8; Mic. 1:3-7; 5:10-15; 6:10-16; Nah.1:2-14; 2:13; Zeph. 1:2-9; 2:5-11; 3:5; Hag. 2:21-22; Zech. 9:1-8; 11:6; Mal. 3:5; Rev. 2:21-23).

31 Exod. 3:6; 19:21; 33:20; 1 Kgs 19:11-13; Ps. 66:3; Hos. 10:8; Is. 2:10, 19, 21; 6:5; Jer. 4:26; Rev. 6:12-17.

32 G. Williams, 'The Cross and the Punishment of Sin' in Peterson (ed.), *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*, 88.

33 See also Jeremiah's observation in Jer. 3:11 that 'Faithless Israel has shown herself less guilty than false Judah.'

34 Matt. 11:20-24; Luke 10:13-15; 2 Pet. 2:6; Jude 7; Ezek. 16:48.

35 Williams, 'The Cross and the Punishment of Sin', 75-78.

36 2 Pet. 3:9; Ezek. 18:32; Jonah 4:2; Joel 2:13; Rom. 2:4; Rev. 2:21.

The biblical witness is that far from human beings experiencing as the penalty for their sins merely the impersonal causal consequences of violating the order of creation, God's judgement is active and personal. Although this is represented biblically in the dramatic interventions of God at the Tower of Babel, in the Flood, the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, the plagues of Egypt and the extermination of the Canaanites, the exceptional nature of these catastrophes reveals the heart of God. He is slow to anger and abounding in love. The remarkable thing is not how awful these judgments were but how exceptional they are.

As Oliver O'Donovan points out 'The concept of punishment as an automatic and impersonal return of evil to the doer is a seductive but dangerous one.' Whilst superficially it enables us to think of a wholly friendly god, the price-tag is the conceptualisation of a world without forgiveness or escape in which the implacable Furies render cosmic justice as *karma*.³⁷ Only the personal involvement of God in judgment creates the theological space for his personal interventions in grace.

Like it or not, in keeping with his character as a God who is fundamentally personal and relational, God's wrath is intrinsically personal and relational. Just as God's acts of deliverance are personal, so his acts of wrath are personal.³⁸ The fact that the judgments of God are personal is a cause for praise and thanksgiving. It is because his judgments are personal that he can be prevailed upon to avert them. From the story of Jonah preaching to Nineveh to the prophecies of Jeremiah (Jer. 26:3; 36:3) and Ezekiel, the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments proclaims that God longs to withhold the disaster which will result from our sinful actions if only we will turn back to him.

It is to that deliverance that this paper now turns. The paradox which the Church has always affirmed is 'The one without sin died like a criminal.... The obedient Son died the death of a rebel. The giver of life died like a murderer.'³⁹ What does that act achieve for us in relational terms?

IV. The atonement of the triune God

In his recent article 'Can Punishment Bring Peace?', which is perhaps best described as a defence of the possibility of a defence of penal substitution, Steve Holmes stresses that 'in the classical account of penal substitution, the first note is necessarily grace, God's love towards his sinful creatures.'⁴⁰ If God's wrath were

37 O. O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 113.

38 Ps. 136:10-12; Isa. 46:7; Jer. 23:2-4; 24:4-10; 30:22-24; 33:5-9; 39:15-18; 42:10-12; 45:4-5; 48:44-47; 50:17-20; Lam. 3:31-34; Ezek. 3:16-21; 17:18-24; 20:5-49; 28:25-26; 34:10; 39:21-29; Dan. 9:15-16; Neh. 9:30-31; Hos. 1:6-7; 6:1; 11:9; 14:4; Joel 3:1-3; Zech. 8:14-15; Rev. 11:18. Peterson *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*, 65.

39 M. Stibbe, *Fire and Blood: The Work of the Spirit – The Work of the Cross* (London: Monarch, 2001), 48.

40 S. Holmes, 'Can punishment bring peace? Penal Substitution Revisited' *SJT* 58.1 (2005), 112.

the only note to be sounded, then we would all undergo the punishment of death which our deeds deserve. That Jesus has died in our place is the result, for proponents of penal substitution, of God's love. But how does this love operate?

As Anselm realised, satisfaction for sin can only be made by one who is both fully God and fully man (*Cur Deus Homo* II.4).⁴¹ He makes the case from the nature of the atonement explicitly for the necessity of each of the clauses in the Chalcedonian definition. What is sketched below is an argument which seeks to understand the death of Jesus as the death of our representative: the obedient man, and also as the death of the self-substituting God, in the light of the fact that God loves us and longs to enter into fully restored relationship with us.

1. *Jesus our representative: the obedient man*

As has been demonstrated above, the place which the triune God has given to human beings in his creation and in his covenant-love is one which carries with it the obligation of conscious obedience to his commands. Human beings have violated that obligation and rejected the relationship with God which he wants us to have. Our rebellion, its consequences and its prescribed penalty must be dealt with in order for our relationship with God to be restored.

Jesus alone has lived a life of perfect obedience to God. Two-Natures Christology is essential to a right understanding of the place of the life of perfect obedience to God. In virtue of his nature as man, Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience to God the Father through the power of God the Holy Spirit (and it may be proper to speak, as Calvin does, of his merit in this regard).⁴² Thus, Hebrews 2:10 says that 'In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God,... should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.' Although the obedience of Jesus is consistent with the fact that he was fully God, it matters because of his representative status as fully man.

Jesus was able to act as the representative obedient man on behalf of the whole human race because it was given to him to do so. In his baptism and his death he identified himself with sinful humanity. The doctrine of recapitulation sheds light on how this can be. Jesus' life of obedience retraces both Israel's story and humanity's story, demonstrating obedience where all others had failed.⁴³ But where humanity and Israel had proved faithless, Jesus Christ was faithful. He spent 40 days in the desert, mirroring Israel's 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, but he overcame the devil and remained faithful to God.

The penalty of death pronounced in Genesis 2:17 on human disobedience and rejection of a relationship with God has not been revoked. However, the obedient man, the innocent man, Jesus, has already paid the penalty of death.

41 S. Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 46-47. Anselm's account is not, however, a full-blown penal scheme. See 'Can punishment bring peace?' where Holmes distinguishes it from Calvin's approach.

42 Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xvii.3.

43 M. Ovey, 'The Cross, Creation and the Human Predicament' in Peterson (ed.), *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*, 124-25.

This is the culmination of his life of obedience (Phil. 2:8). He has *already* exhausted its curse.⁴⁴ As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 '... one died for all, therefore all died;...' (see also Rom. 6:5-6; Gal. 2; Eph. 2; Phil. 2; Col. 1-2, 3:1-3, 9; 1 Pet. 4:1-2).

Henceforth, all of humanity divides into two classes, those who are accounted as being *in Christ*, who are regarded by God as having already been crucified with him, and therefore for whom the penalty of death has already been satisfied (Rom. 8:1), and those who have chosen to remain apart from Christ, on whom the penalty of death has yet to be carried out. 'Either God will judge people on the last day (Rom. 2:1-16) or he has judged them in Christ on the cross.'⁴⁵

The parallels between Adam and Christ in the New Testament are express. We find Christ, the Second Adam, having an encounter with a tree, the tree of the curse (Deut. 21:22; 1 Pet. 2:24.). Whereas the first failed the test of obedience, Hebrews 5:9 tells us that Christ was made perfect in obedience through suffering. Fallen human nature was assumed by Jesus Christ and brought back into obedience to God. A human will was fully aligned with the will of God, a man walked in relationship with God without stumbling or falling. Jesus himself confirmed his voluntary obedience to the Father in John 14:31 when he declared that 'the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.'

Whereas the first Adam grasped at equality with God, at a knowledge of the universe which was not received as a gift from God but snatched from his grasp, the christological hymn of Philippians 2 tells us that Jesus, who was in very nature God, did not cling on to his divine privileges but condescended to become incarnate as a human being.

On the one perfect human being, on God incarnate, was placed the sin of the world. He bore the curse of death which had been pronounced to Adam and Eve. He took upon himself the full penalty for sin, that of death. He paid that penalty, he exhausted that curse (Gal. 3:13). Thus, 'as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.' (1 Cor. 15:22).

Viewed in those terms, the Last Judgment is nothing other than the completion and execution of the First Judgment of Genesis 2-3, and all that has happened in the interim is grace, i.e. better than we, as a rebellious race, have any right to expect from a holy God whose love we have rejected.

Jesus rose again. This was the moment of divine vindication. The words the Father had spoken at the baptism of Jesus: 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased' (Mt. 4:17) were reiterated as the Father raised the Son through the power of the Spirit (Rom. 1:4; Gal. 1:1). Jesus was raised to life and ascended into the very presence of God. What was new at the Ascension was not the return of God the Son to the Father, but the ascension of humanity to God

44 J. I. Packer, 'What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution' in *Celebrating the Saving Work of God: Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer Vol. 1* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 105.

45 Chester, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 154.

the Father. The God-man ascended was the first to stand in the presence of God, in full relationship and restored communion with him. And it was the purpose of God that he should be the first of many human beings to do so. 1 Peter 3:18 says: 'Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.' (NIV). Although the meaning of righteousness language in the New Testament is a topic much under discussion at the present time, that verse might be expounded in the light of the present theme, as follows:

Christ died for sins once for all, the [one who was in right relationship with God] for [those who were not in right relationship with God], to bring you [back into right relationship with] God.

If that exposition is plausible, and if, irrespective of whether the exegesis is secure, the general point is made, then it is from this perspective that it becomes possible to understand the importance of 'faith in Christ'. 'Faith in Christ' is shorthand for 'a relationship with Christ'. As Alan Stibbs put it in 1958, '... "justification by faith" is no mere legal fiction... but an action of God wrought in the sphere of our personal and individual relation to Him.'⁴⁶ A relationship with Christ is fundamental to salvation (John 14:6-7). It is through God's Son, Jesus Christ, that we are adopted as sons (Gal. 4:4-6) and have the right to be called children of God (John 1:12). It is difficult to see how the point could be put any more plainly than it is in John 3:36: 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.' To have faith in Christ is to be rightly related to Christ. Because of who he is and because of who we are, to be rightly related to him is to trust in him and be faithful to him.

David Peterson rightly combines the language of relationships with traditional Protestant terminology when he writes: 'The cosmos, and humans in particular, must become righteous, in a right relationship with God. Our condition as sinners, unable to save ourselves, means that we need the alien righteousness that is found in Christ alone. This righteousness becomes ours through faith-union with him.'⁴⁷

The purpose of Jesus' death, once for all, was to restore our relationship with God (1 Pet. 3:18). 'To know Jesus is to know "life" because *he* is "life".'⁴⁸ He is described in 1 John 5:20 as 'the true God and eternal life'. Therefore, to know him is to know life (1 John 1:1-3; 5:11-12; John 17:3). Our relationship of sonship with God the Father is dependent on our union with God the Son.⁴⁹ As Letham argues, in Paul's theology, 'every single aspect of salvation is received "in Christ".'⁵⁰

46 'Justification by Faith: The Reinstatement of the Doctrine Today' The Latimer Day Lecture of the Fellowship of Evangelical Churchmen in 1958, reprinted as the Appendix to Peterson (ed.) *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*.

47 Peterson, *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*, xvii.

48 Hughes, *God of the Poor*, 41.

49 Chester, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 52.

50 R. Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2004), 466.

Henceforth, humanity is counted in one of two great camps. There are those who are 'in Adam', over whom the curse of death still looms, and there are those who are 'in Christ', for whom it has been exhausted.

Those who are still in Adam, those with stubborn and unrepentant hearts, are storing up wrath against themselves 'for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.' (Rom. 2:5). 'This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ' (Rom. 2:16).

For those who are in Christ, the price has been paid. For them, the relationship with God has been restored. They are joined to Christ through the Spirit who has brought them to faith. They are the 'sons of God through faith in Christ' (Gal. 3:26; 1 John 3:1-2). As Calvin puts it: 'Christ was made man that he might make us children of God'.⁵¹

For the children of God being joined to Christ means being filled with his Spirit, learning to follow him in obedience to God, and looking forward to follow him in being raised to life and enjoying the presence of God forever in a fully restored creation. It also involves restored relationships of brotherhood and sisterhood among human beings.

2. *Jesus our substitute: the self-substituting God*⁵²

As with a right understanding of Christ's obedience so a right understanding of Christ's substitutionary atonement depends on Two-Natures Christology. If Christ's substitutionary death is understood solely as the act of sacrifice of one innocent man, then a number of problems clearly arise. Is this something which God the Father has imposed on an unsuspecting human being? How can one man's death effect salvation for a vast number of others?

But Two-Natures Christology insists that the person who went to the cross was fully God. Jesus was fully God. He was not an innocent man whom God the Father picked upon and inflicted the sins of the world upon. Jesus is not the bound Isaac of Genesis 22, nor is God the Father Abraham. Jesus is the lamb provided by God. He was God himself, God of God, the Son of God who agreed with God the Father in the unity of God the Holy Spirit that for the salvation of the world he would endure the cross. As Calvin points out, '[Jesus] was subject to death because He wished to be,... He was crucified because He offered Himself'.⁵³ God substitutes himself in order to exhaust the curse laid on humanity which rejected a relationship with God and in order to bring humanity back into a relationship with God. 'The Son of God stepped into the place of sinners and bore the brunt of God's wrath against their sins'.⁵⁴

51 Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xiii.1.

52 Those familiar with the writings of John Stott will, of course, instantly recognise this as a variation on the title of the central chapter in his book *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1986).

53 Calvin, *Commentary on Matt. 17:1*; also Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* I.8-9; II.11.

54 R. A. Peterson, *Calvin and the Atonement* (Fearn: Mentor, 1999), 96.

This insistence of the unity of purpose of the Trinity in determining the death of Christ safeguards against the opposite error to the one which has been considered. Just as the death of Christ is not something which God the Father imposes on Jesus nor is the atonement of humanity something which Jesus by his sacrifice extracts from God who is unwilling to forgive.

The co-inherence of Son and Father justifies Paul's use of language when he says that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor. 5:19). Roger Forster explains the mystery of the cross as God exhausting his wrath within himself⁵⁵ and bringing out of his love a solution to the equations love + justice = ? and wrath + mercy = ?, so that human beings might know a restored relationship with God. Our restored relationship with God depends on the extinction of the curse of death.

God the Father did not stand aloof from the cross of Christ. It is God's heart-break for the sins of the world that is demonstrated there. At this point, the depth of the love of God the Father for the world he created through his Son and by his Spirit becomes clear. From first to last, God's dealings with fallen humanity have been characterised by his love. After the Fall, God came seeking Adam in the Garden of Eden. In fact, Ephesians 1:4-5 speaks of his love for us reaching back 'before the creation of the world'. The extent of this love leads him to take action, to give his Son to take away the sins of the world (John 3:16) and to make us children of God (1 John 3:1-2). It is the longing of the triune God to reconcile the world to himself which is revealed there. We see on the cross, the love of God the Father which led him to give his Son; the love of God the Son which led him to sacrifice himself; and the love of God the Holy Spirit which binds them together in their unity of loving purpose.

The union of Jesus' human will with the will of the Father is exposed to our view in the agonies of Gethsemane.⁵⁶ Here, as Paul Weston argues, we see that 'Jesus the Son is a willing participant and co-worker with the Father in a divinely planned and executed mission to redeem humanity from its chosen path of rebellion and destruction.'⁵⁷ In his excellent and accessible book, *Delighting in the Trinity*, Tim Chester writes: 'Even in death Christ is sovereign. He is not the victim of the Roman authorities, still less is he the passive victim of his Father. Through the Spirit he is the agent of his own death, freely offering himself in love for his people (John 10:18).'⁵⁸

Chester distinguishes between two opposite mistakes which may occur if we play off the Father and the Son against one another, as if somehow they were not united and did not mutually indwell one another. Only on such a view, which tends towards tritheism, can we fall into the trap of picturing an unwilling Father

55 Foster, *Trinity*, 93.

56 Foster, *Trinity*, 94.

57 P. Weston 'Proclaiming Christ Crucified Today' in Peterson (ed.), *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*, 148, also 152.

58 Chester, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 68; Stibbe, *Fire and Blood*, 73; Calvin, *Hebrews and First and Second Peter* (St Andrews Press, 1963), 121.

grudgingly placated by a self-sacrificing Son or of an unwilling Son victimised by a vicious Father.⁵⁹ Only if God is both three and one 'can the cross be for us reconciliation and inclusion within the divine community.'⁶⁰

The co-inherence of Father and Son means that, as Chester puts it: 'Their unity at the cross is more than a unity of wills. It remains a unity of being.... The experience of the cross does not happen to another. God is not forsaking another. He is not judging another. God is forsaking himself. He is judging himself.'⁶¹

Chester argues powerfully that 'the substitutionary view is the truly trinitarian view' because it reveals 'atonement [to be] a transaction between God and God; between the Father and the Son through the Spirit. It is an event *within* God. Salvation starts with God, is achieved by God and is applied by God.'⁶²

3. The role of the Holy Spirit

The atonement was an act of the triune God, in which all three Persons of the Trinity were involved. The writer to the Hebrews speaks in Heb. 9:14 of Christ offering himself without blemish through the eternal Spirit to God.⁶³ Stibbe's exposition of this passage is as follows:

The best exposition would... seem to be this: 'through the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for sins'. Jesus endured his suffering with the assistance of the Spirit who lives for ever (i.e. the third person of the Trinity). The cross of Christ is consequently a trinitarian event. The Son offers himself as the unblemished lamb prophesied by John the Baptist. The offering is made to the Father in heaven, whose justice requires the shedding of blood for effective atonement. The Spirit of God – the eternal bond between the Son and the Father – helps Jesus in his sufferings, thereby making at-one-ment between mortal humans and the God who is from everlasting to everlasting.

Since everything Jesus 'says and does flows out of the plenitude of the Spirit's anointing',⁶⁴ it follows that his death was accomplished in the power of the Spirit. As Stibbe puts it: 'the Spirit's power was present in the Son's passion.'⁶⁵ It is the unifying action of the Spirit which maintains the unity of will between God the Father and God the Son who together will the salvation of creation through the sacrificial death of the Son, the Lamb of God.

Just as the cross was a trinitarian event, so the resurrection was the work of the triune God (Rom. 8:11; 1 Tim. 3:16; 1 Pet. 3:18). The resurrection is the inauguration, the affirmation and the promise of eternal life, in which we participate

59 Chester, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 63-65.

60 Chester, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 70.

61 Chester, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 64.

62 Chester, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 151-52.

63 Stibbe, *Fire and Blood*, 63-66; Forster, *Trinity*, 94-95; Chester, *Delighting in the Trinity*, 67-68.

64 Stibbe, *Fire and Blood*, 57.

65 Stibbe, *Fire and Blood*, 60.

through faith-union with Christ (John 14:19). 'Our salvation consists of union with Christ, and so our resurrection is a sharing in his human resurrection and is part of the same reality.'⁶⁶

Because of the death and resurrection of Christ, the possibility of a new relationship with God has begun. Human beings have access into the very presence of God, an intimacy with the Father which goes beyond the experience of the Garden of Eden.

Justification and sanctification are theological concepts which it is important to distinguish but not to divorce from one another.⁶⁷ It is not within the scope of this paper even to begin to sketch a doctrine of sanctification, but some remarks must be made because of their relevance to the theme at hand. The two ideas are clearly linked in 1 Peter 1:2, which is addressed 'To... [those] who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood.' Our relationship with God is dependent on the choice of the Father, the blood of the Son and the sanctification of the Holy Spirit. It is important to note that, as in the Old Testament, that relationship with God is one which carries with it the obligation of obedience.

From a relational trinitarian perspective, an important answer to the question: 'Why did Jesus die?' is that Jesus died in order that the Holy Spirit might be released upon the people of God.⁶⁸ This may be part of the meaning of 1 Corinthians 15:45 where it is said that "'The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.'

The relational implications of this are paramount. It is the Holy Spirit who brings us into fellowship with God, who enables our faith in Christ, and who gives us the experience of the love of the Father (1 John 4:13-16).

The reasons why Jesus had to die and ascend to the right hand of the Father before the Spirit was released may not be immediately apparent to us, but John's Gospel clearly records Jesus teaching his incredulous disciples that this was what must occur. The death, resurrection and ascension of Christ are the essential precursors to Pentecost and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (John 16:7-11).⁶⁹

The prophecy of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31 is placed in an explicitly relational context. Israel broke the Old Covenant, even though Yahweh was their husband (v.32). Under the New Covenant, Israel will no longer be bound by a law that is merely external. God's law will be written on their hearts and, 'they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest' (v.34). Three aspects of the New Covenant are brought to the fore in this prophecy: the internalising of the law; the knowledge of God; and the forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sins

66 Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 394; see also Calvin's *Institutes* II.xvi.13.

67 As Calvin taught, they form a *duplex gratia*.

68 See Hamilton, 'Were Old Covenant Believers Indwelt by the Holy Spirit?' *Themelios* 30.1 (2004), 12-22 for the argument that the dwelling of God in the Old Covenant was in the temple whereas in the New Covenant God's people are His temple.

is achieved by the work of the Son on the cross through the power of the Holy Spirit. The knowledge of God is achieved by the work of the Son who reveals the Father and the work of the Spirit who reveals the Son. The internalising of the law is achieved by the work of the Spirit who is the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of Christ. Again the link between the knowledge of God and obedience to God is crystal clear. In the New Covenant, obedience to God is not mechanistic or legalistic, but living, which expresses our filial relationship to him. This can only occur by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ is our example of a life lived in relationship with God. Such a life is a life of faith and obedience to God, although for us, unlike Christ, it also involves daily repentance for our sins. David Peterson sketches the place of obedience to Christ and faith in his atoning work in 1 John.⁷⁰

Fundamental to this paper's understanding of a relational approach to the atonement is the assertion that responsibilities are integral to relationships. This is true in both the Old and New Testaments. This was well understood in feudal times, when the lord and vassal were in a personal relationship confirmed by an oath of fealty, and which gave rise to obligations to maintain order and justice on the part of the lord and to obey on the part of the vassal.⁷¹ The importance of personal relationship was therefore far from unknown to Anselm.

God is sovereign; he is our Maker; we do owe him our worship and our obedience. But he has also revealed himself to be our loving heavenly Father, who indwells us by his Holy Spirit and has adopted us as his sons. The New Testament uses a variety of relational metaphors to describe the people who have been brought into relationship with God. They are 'the people of God' (1 Peter 2:9-10), 'members of God's household' (Eph. 2:19), the bride of Christ (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 21:2), the community of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14).

Right relations are central to Jesus' farewell discourse as recorded in John's Gospel. He commands his disciples to love one another (John 13:34-35; 15:12, 17). But he also spells out what it means to love him. 'If you love me, you will obey what I command.'⁷² An intimate relationship with God, the very presence of God, is what is promised to those who love and obey Jesus (John 14:17, 20-21, 23; 15:4). In both the Old and the New Testaments therefore, to love God, to be in right relationship with God, is to walk in humble obedience to his commands and in reliance on his steadfast love (*hesed*) for us.

V. Conclusions

I have argued above that responsibilities are fundamental to relationships, and that inherent in our relationship with God our Creator is the obligation to obey

69 Stibbe, *Fire and Blood*, 75-86.

70 Peterson (ed.), *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*, 60-61.

71 Holmes, *Listening to the Past*, 41; C. E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study in Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 89.

72 John 14:15, 21, 23; 15:10, 14; see also Rev. 12:17.

his commands. Our disobedience to his commands therefore not only has the character of law-breaking but also amounts to a rejection of a relationship with him. From a relational perspective, the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity make sense of a model of penal substitutionary atonement, because through them we can understand the death of Christ as the death of the representative Man who alone lived in perfect relationship with God and also the death of the self-substituting God who exhausts in himself the curse which he pronounced over our disobedience.

If we find it difficult to articulate these truths today, perhaps the problems lie at the level of our understanding of relationships and of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation rather than because the idea of penal substitution has become a dead metaphor.

Abstract

A relational understanding of the Trinity does not lead to the abandonment of judicial metaphors for the atonement but provides a context for them. The Trinity places relationships at the heart of the moral order. Relationships involve obligations, and the cross was the triune God's response of love to humanity's violation of our relational obligations towards him. Both God's judgment on sin and God's salvation from sin are personal acts. A Chalcedonian understanding of Christ's two natures enables us to understand Jesus' death as the self-substitution of God for humanity and as the representative death of the perfect man, offering himself through the Spirit, on behalf of humanity. Those who are, by the Spirit, in Christ are in restored relationship with God.

Trinity in Human Community

Exploring Congregational Life in the Image of the Social Trinity

Peter R. Holmes

The one God, in Christian thought, is not a single divine 'Person' but a Trinity of three inter-twined 'Persons'. God, on this social Trinitarian view, is a community of love and so relationship lies at the very heart of God's identity. In this book, Peter Holmes builds on growing interest in idea of the Trinity as a divine society by offering a practical application to congregational life. The central issue is how faith community could better reflect the harmony and diversity of the Trinity. *Trinity in Human Community* outlines aspects of both the author's personal journey and his theological explorations in the context of a particular congregation that has sought to break new ground in radical, relational, community living. This is the first book of a trilogy entitled 'Discipleship as Wholeness' devoted to re-imagining Christian community along the lines of a therapeutic community model.

Peter R. Holmes is a management trainer and co-founder of Christ Church Deal in Kent.

978-1-84227-470-5 / 216x140 mm / 224pp / £11.99

Paternoster, 9 Holdom Avenue, Bletchley, Milton Keynes MK1 1QR, UK