

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

EQ  
EQ  
EQ  
EQ  
EQ  
EQ  
EQ  
EQ  
EQ  
EQ  
EQ  
EQ  
EQ

# Evangelical Quarterly

**An International Review  
of Bible and Theology**  
in Defence of the Historic Christian Faith

Vol. LXXXIV No. 4 October 2012

Editors: I Howard Marshall, John-Paul Lotz,  
John G F Wilks



# Beyond the kaleidoscope: towards a synthesis of views on the atonement

*Stephen J. Burnhope*

*Stephen Burnhope received the MA in Aspects of Biblical Interpretation with Distinction at London School of Theology in 2009 and is currently engaged in Ph.D research at King's College London. This article is adapted from his MA Dissertation.*

KEY WORDS: atonement; penal substitution; kaleidoscopic; modernity; post-modernity; evangelicalism; recapitulation; interchange; soteriology

## I. General introduction

Although redemption through Christ has always been the basis of Christian faith, no final and universally accepted definition of the manner of its achievement has ever been formulated.<sup>1</sup> As John McIntyre notes, the manner in which the death of Christ is referred to in the Church's credal and confessional statements, particularly regarding the forgiveness of sins, is singularly frugal, very varied and nowhere approaches the sophistication applied to doctrines of God and the person of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Amongst many scholars today, there is a preference not to insist that any one theory is central, dominant or 'right', needing to 'win out' over others. This reflects the variety of ways offered by scripture for understanding how Christ's life and death is efficacious in the salvation of fallen humanity. A personal fondness for particular conceptualisations may be expressed, but it is widely affirmed that a multi-faceted expression is appropriate for one's understanding to be in harmony with the full biblical picture. Such thinking reflects the perspective that scripture provides sundry theories of the atonement in the form of metaphors, models, images or stories of salvation that are not related in any obvious or organised way.<sup>3</sup> Joel Green has dubbed this expansive range of ideas the 'kaleidoscopic view'.<sup>4</sup>

There is, however, one notable exception: from within the Reformed and evangelical traditions, some proponents of penal substitutionary atonement ('PSA') go beyond it being one understanding among many (even, a preferred

---

1 J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (Peabody: Prince Press, 2003 edition), 163.

2 John McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 1.

3 Stephen Holmes, *The Wondrous Cross* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 154.

4 Joel Green, 'Kaleidoscopic Response', in James Beilby and Paul Eddy (eds.), *The Nature of the Atonement* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 157-85.

one) and insist on its priority over and against other atonement ideas that are, at best, rendered subservient. For such advocates, penal substitution is the defining characteristic of the true gospel.

This situation gives rise to a significant hermeneutical problem, since we have at issue here two conflicting hermeneutical perspectives on atonement. One asserts no single model should be seen as controlling; the other, meanwhile, insists that PSA is so critical to authentic biblical faith that it must be given precisely that role! It is an awkward dilemma, particularly as the nature of the issue does not appear to accommodate a customary 'both/and' solution.

In this paper, we will firstly examine the kaleidoscopic understanding of the atonement, endeavouring to identify the hermeneutical bases for disavowing primacy to any one perspective. Secondly, we will examine the penal substitutionary understanding of atonement, again considering the hermeneutical arguments put forward to support its exclusivity. Thirdly, we will address the challenge of this hermeneutical log-jam, asking whether a mediating position is feasible, or whether some new direction is required that still does justice to all legitimate hermeneutical concerns. Finally, in drawing conclusions, we will remain mindful of the advice of Colin Gunton, that any contemporary debate should ultimately return to the real context of theology – the worship, life and mission of the Church.<sup>5</sup>

## II. The kaleidoscopic view

As the expression of the human predicament alters, so there will likewise be a shift in the way that salvation is expressed. Thus as time passes there develops a whole kaleidoscope of images of atonement, none of which can be complete in itself, each of which remains to overlap with the next, and all of which contribute to the pattern of God's act of reconciliation.<sup>6</sup>

### *a. Multiple expressions of atonement*

Whilst each model of the atonement operates as an 'incomplete symbol' and so should not be pressed too far, or treated totally literally,<sup>7</sup> the kaleidoscopic view proposes that all the principal models are germane to a full understanding of the atoning significance of Christ. Each is a way of describing something that is really there but can be described only in the indirect manner of this kind of language.<sup>8</sup>

Advocates of a kaleidoscopic approach point out that no single explanation of the atonement is articulated in the Bible. For example, Stephen Sykes argues that the biblical evidence upon which to build a systematic theology of atone-

---

5 Colin Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), xii.

6 Paul Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: the Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), 7.

7 Fiddes, *Past Event*, 31.

8 Gunton, *Actuality*, 65.

ment cannot be straightforwardly applied. He finds no surprise in the fact that not all contemporary Westerners live in or are persuaded by one overarching metanarrative and sees in atonement one concession that can easily be made to Postmodern thought: the story of salvation exists in a plurality of narrative versions, and inside them there is ample space for improvisation and imaginative freedom. The point of separating out the atonement narratives within scripture would be to enable key features of the Christian understanding to be made intelligible. A 'pluralistic' reading approach therefore becomes a positive tool for affirming the breadth and depth of the full biblical message.<sup>9</sup>

We have a sense of its having the shape of a story, with a setting, theme, plot(s) and resolution – but the plot or plots can be told in episodes, and the episodes lend themselves to different versions. There is enough coherence to provide a unity, but not so much definitive detail as to stifle the capacity for improvisation on the theme.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than surrendering to postmodernism, Sykes is actually mirroring *post-modern thinking*.<sup>11</sup> The difference is crucial, particularly for missiological and pedagogical concerns, for different people will construe differently the same reality according to their different paradigms or 'worldviews'. Allowing that we find in scripture multiple, overlapping and complementary images – not to mention a slew of metaphors – explaining the identity and character of God and his relation to us, it should be no surprise if the Bible reflects similarly on the atonement.<sup>12</sup>

Peter Schmiechen also locates his reflection within the biblical evidence.<sup>13</sup> That the NT offers so many explanations of the atonement indicates two things. Firstly, that there was no single, primary explanation that answered all of the questions posed, up to – and beyond – the development of the classic credal statements.<sup>14</sup> Had that been the case, Christian preaching, teaching and apologetics would simply have used it. Secondly, that the story of Jesus was not as self-explanatory as conservatives have often assumed, evidence of which is seen in the disciples' fear and confusion following each event of the Easter weekend. Just about everything in the Jesus story requires explaining.

Accordingly, the multiple atonement theories attempt to provide an inter-

9 Stephen Sykes, *The Story of Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997), 22-24.

10 Sykes, *Story*, 24.

11 Robertson McQuilkin and Bradford Mullen, 'The Impact of Postmodern Thinking on Evangelical Hermeneutics', *JETS* 40/1 (March 1997), 69.

12 Green, 'Kaleidoscopic Response', 65.

13 Peter Schmiechen, *Saving Power* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 4-7; 316.

14 The absence of a credal position on atonement is puzzling. McIntyre, *Shape*, 1-10. That it was simply 'obvious' seems unsatisfactory. Yoder suggests the idea of a redemptive death 'for sin' was so widespread it was 'not a real problem in the first generation'. John Howard Yoder, *Preface to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), 133, 52.

nally coherent explanation of Jesus' life, death and resurrection – an intentional search for connections to make the cross and the resurrection events intelligible. Moreover, their purpose is fundamentally *evangelistic* in nature, intended to draw people into the saving power of Christ.

As with Sykes, Schmiechen allows the theories freedom to interpret the story of Jesus in terms applicable to new situations, drawing a new generation into the believing community. He deems this the *contextual* value of atonement theories.<sup>15</sup> How, then, is the range of potential theories to be bounded? Firstly, by being forced to operate in quite prescribed circumstances. They operate with a completed narrative – all theories are post-resurrection interpretations of events that have already occurred. Secondly, the search for connections follows definite patterns, centred mostly on the 'relational': between Jesus and God; between Jesus and the known world of Jewish scripture and religious practices; and between Jesus and the disciples' experience with him before Good Friday.

In slight contrast, John Howard Yoder is less willing to accept that there is no 'right answer', or (at least) that not *all* answers are 'right'. Although several teachings might be *in some sense* right, we need to recognise that being wrong is also possible. Relative pluralism may be a good way to overcome some kind of cultural narrowness, but ultimate or absolute pluralism is not justifiable. At a minimum, Yoder has definite ideas about which answers are better than others, and holds the possibility of a 'most nearly right answer'.<sup>16</sup> While his personal preference is towards a *narrative Christus Victor* model, the particular value of Yoder's contribution lies in some further methodological considerations. Firstly, he raises the question of vocabulary. In its original etymology, the linguistic equivalent of the word 'atonement' would be 'reunion' or 'reunification' and the semantic equivalent, 'reconciliation'. Over time, the meaning shifted. Initially, it included *all* the wide field of meanings related to the saving work of Christ in response to sin, however understood – one label for the discussion of *many* answers. Thereafter, in popular usage, the term somehow came to designate more narrowly the dominant 'satisfaction' or 'reparation' view.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, Yoder asks that we consider what a doctrine of atonement is actually all about. He proposes three elements.<sup>18</sup> Atonement doctrine:

1. Has to explain why Christ's death was necessary. If it was inappropriate, if it was not necessary, or if it did not have to be this way, then it does not make sense.

---

15 Schmiechen, *Saving Power*, 7.

16 Yoder, *Preface*, 233-35.

17 Yoder, *Preface*, 284-85.

18 Yoder, *Preface*, 288-89. Yoder takes his argument a step further, asserting we must find a way of weaving all of the atonement concepts together, finding a meaning of the death of Christ that fits with them all. However, this may be overreaching the biblical warrant. McKnight notes, for example, that a ransom is not a substitute: Jesus does not become a slave for other slaves, he is a ransom for those who are enslaved. Scot McKnight, *Jesus and His Death* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005), 357.

2. Must do justice to all the biblical language. We cannot merely pick and choose the concept we like best and drop the rest – that would be theologically illegitimate.
3. Should, in some necessary and critical way, link to other important issues in Christian thought. For example, it ought to coordinate somehow with incarnation, in its double Christological meaning of ‘genuine humanity’ and ‘genuine divine presence’.

However we develop models and metaphors, though, the cross of Christ must retain centre stage in the evangelical understanding. Whilst it may have secondary metaphorical application,<sup>19</sup> the cross *itself* is not a metaphor, but a real event. We may ponder its full significance, but that it possesses deep significant is clear in the NT record.<sup>20</sup> Hence, any theory of the atonement that contends the cross is not central to the plan ‘dissolves the only story the church has ever known.’<sup>21</sup>

Green concurs that ‘Christ crucified’ is the means for comprehending the eternal purpose of God, but his principal ground for a multivalent view lies in the diversity of voices in both the scriptures and Christian tradition with respect to understanding the atonement.<sup>22</sup> The significance of Christ’s death is woven so tightly into the fabric of God’s purpose that we may never exhaust the many ways of articulating its meaning for our salvation. God sending his Son to save is worked out in a ‘kaleidoscope of purpose statements’ found in the biblical record, including: to fulfil the law; to call sinners to repentance; to bring a sword; to give his life as a ransom for many; to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God in the other cities; and, to seek and to save the lost.<sup>23</sup> The NT writers generated a wide array of images for communicating the saving importance of the cross, congregating around spheres of public life in antiquity. In so doing, they ‘draw on the life worlds of their audiences’ while at the same time working to make Israel’s ancient scriptural images familiar ones.<sup>24</sup>

### *b. Critique of the kaleidoscopic view*

Underlying Green’s position we sense two themes, both linked to pastoral and missiological concerns: (1) antipathy towards the penal substitutionary understanding (or at least, a popular and widespread caricature of it), and (2) a desire to interface with postmodern thought (in which a pluralistic approach is particularly amenable). For the present, we will focus on some shortcomings in the latter.

The first lies in confusing ‘meaning’ with ‘significance’.<sup>25</sup> To say that the work

19 Gal. 2:20; 5:24.

20 1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2.

21 Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 61.

22 Green, ‘Kaleidoscopic View’, 157.

23 Green, ‘Kaleidoscopic View’, 164-65, 170.

24 Green, ‘Kaleidoscopic View’, 166-67, 169.

25 Roger Lundin, *The Promise of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 35-37.

of Christ *feels* significant to different people in different ways at different times is not synonymous with stating a truth about atonement's intrinsic *meaning*. Might it not be argued that people should be presented with atonement's biblical meaning, notwithstanding their starting cultural assumptions or worldview? If we designed all Christian truth around the way it would initially be perceived by an as-yet uninformed contemporary audience, we would be in some trouble. Indeed, the 'scandal of the cross' itself would have been rejected, as a theme incompatible with first-century Jewish culture.

Secondly, by accepting the general principle of a 'kaleidoscope' of imagery we undermine our ability to challenge the validity of an image generated. By implication, we are authorising salvific images from our experience to be brought into scripture, rather than salvifically bringing scripture into our experiences. Even allowing that some cultural translation may be required, we should affirm that 'our task as Christ's servants is to preach the unchanging gospel, not to implement modifications as we see fit',<sup>26</sup> since 'the perceived needs of a sinful world will rarely coincide with its real needs.'<sup>27</sup> Truth is more than simply 'what works'.<sup>28</sup>

Thirdly, constraining popular understandings of atonement within biblical boundaries will be more challenging in an environment where, rather than focussing on a single memorable message, imagination can be given free range. It risks falling foul of Smail's warning that 'A theory of the atonement that is out of relation to the historical record of what Jesus did and saw himself to be doing in his death is disqualified.'<sup>29</sup> In favourable contrast, penal substitution offers one simple gospel message – 'Agree with it or not, the theory is intelligible.'<sup>30</sup>

Fourthly, whilst the full biblical understanding of 'sin' embraces a range of problems, it should not be presumed merely because of multiple effects that there is no single *proximate cause* for which a single *proximate remedy* (or, understanding of that remedy) is appropriate, notwithstanding the presence of concurrent or contributing causes. Nor should we assume the various manifestations of sin operate in parallel, when they may operate in series. Seen in this way, the quest would be not so much to validate multiple atonement ideas but to identify a prime or initially causative idea (a causal *nexus*) amongst them.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, that there should be a variety of images offered in scripture does not in itself establish that there is no hierarchy involved, at least so far as 'primary' and 'secondary' (or, more-common and less-common) understandings are con-

26 Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey and Andrew Sach, *Pierced For Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 225.

27 Jeffery, Ovey and Sach, *Pierced*, 223.

28 Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville: John Knox, 2001), 40.

29 Tom Smail, *Once and for All* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998), 19.

30 Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1976 edition), 402.

31 On causation and related terms, see Gerald Young, Andrew Kane and Keith Nicholson, 'Dictionary of Terms Related to Causality, Causation, Law, and Psychology', in *Causality of Psychological Injury* (New York: Springer, 2007), especially Chapter 4.



cerned. Were Green, for example, to attempt a synthesis of models, this might become apparent, but he does not. The claim that there is no *pivotal* metaphor – a one within the many – is therefore unproven. At a minimum might there not be, in Yoder's modest terms, a 'most nearly right answer'?

### III. The penal substitutionary view

We strongly reject, therefore, every explanation of the death of Christ which does not have at its centre the principle of 'satisfaction through substitution' ... 'substitution' is not a further 'theory' or 'image' to be set alongside the others, but rather the foundation of them all, without which each lacks cogency.<sup>32</sup>

#### *a. Penal substitutionary atonement*

Thomas Schreiner summarises PSA in the following terms:

The penalty for sin is death. Sinners deserve eternal punishment in hell from God himself because of their sin and guilt. God's holy anger is directed against all those who have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And yet, because of God's great love, he sent Christ to bear the punishment of our sins. Christ died in our place, took to himself our sin and guilt, and bore our penalty so that we might receive forgiveness of sins.<sup>33</sup>

With sin understood as a transgression of the law of God, salvation is understood as freedom from the just penalty for that transgression. Here we have the simple basis of what is sometimes called the 'legal' theory, with atonement set in a juridical context. In the early mediæval period of Anselm,<sup>34</sup> all crime was an infringement of the personal honour of the feudal overlord, who embodied justice in his person. Anselm's innovation lay in applying the judicial categories analogously to God as the maintainer of *universal* law and justice, the order and beauty of the universe. In sinning, mankind owes God a debt of offended honour, and yet, only God is capable of paying it. This, then, provides the reason God became man. The infinite value of the obedient life of the Son outweighs (or 'satisfies') the infinite debt of sin.

By the time of the Reformation, feudalism had been superseded by the Roman view of criminal law, under which the *only* satisfaction that could be offered *was* punishment. Impressed by Anselm's argument that divine justice required satisfying, Calvin and the other Reformers simply reworked it in terms of their

32 John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1989), 159, 168. Whilst 'substitution' does not presuppose 'penal', this is Stott's context (see 133-58).

33 Thomas Schreiner, 'Penal Substitution View', in Beilby and Eddy (eds.), *Nature of the Atonement*, 72-73.

34 See Fiddes, *Past Event*, 96-108; Gunton, *Actuality*, 86-96; William Placher, *A History of Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983), 142-45.

criminal law. This resulted in a theory within which God *does* pass the sentence that the law demands, but carries it out on a *substitute*. Paul Fiddes summarises it in the following terms:

When Calvin built a theory of atonement upon the principle of divine justice, he therefore concluded that ‘the guilt, which held us liable to punishment, was transferred to the head of the Son of God’. God’s law had been infringed through human sin, and so penalty must be inflicted upon offenders in order to maintain the moral order of the universe. In the act of atonement, Christ pays the debt to justice by bearing the necessary punishment instead of humankind.<sup>35</sup>

Already, then, we are struck by a very different way of perceiving imagery of the atonement, where penal substitution functions as a ‘central hub’ from which ‘all of these other doctrines fan out.’<sup>36</sup> All the various models offer a positive contribution, but penal substitution is regarded as *controlling* – ‘the *sine qua non* of evangelical soteriology’<sup>37</sup> and ‘a distinguishing mark of the world-wide evangelical fraternity.’<sup>38</sup>

### *b. Critique of the penal-substitutionary-only view*

The evangelical understanding of sin and salvation has been articulated in personal, autobiographical terms of individuals and their eternal destiny since at least the time of Wesley, Whitefield and Edwards. It is interesting, however, that Paul almost always speaks of ‘sin’ (ἁμαρτία) in the singular – of sixty-two instances, only nine are in the plural. This is because Paul does not understand sin as just ‘a collection of individual acts’.<sup>39</sup> Rather, it is the retributive framework of thought underlying penal substitution that tends to regard sins as individual deeds, each requiring a corresponding penalty.<sup>40</sup>

To understand the reasons for this individualistic emphasis, the context is important. Evangelicalism emerged ‘precisely on the trailing edge of Christen-

35 Fiddes, *Event*, 98-99. The theories of Anselm and Calvin are both influenced by views of law and justice in their day. This does not disqualify them, but hints at a deeper question: whether theories operate as timeless, ahistorical truth, or biblically-sourced imagery that is persuasive in touching humanity’s felt needs in particular places and times.

36 Jeffery, Ovey and Sach, *Pierced*, 211.

37 David Hilborn, ‘Atonement, Evangelicalism and the Evangelical Alliance’, in Derek Tidball, David Hilborn and Justin Thacker (eds.), *The Atonement Debate* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 19. Holmes, however, finds little evidence of penal substitutionary doctrines historically regarded this way in British evangelical theology. Holmes, *Wondrous Cross*, 267-92.

38 J. I. Packer, ‘What Did The Cross Achieve?’, The Tyndale Biblical Theology Lecture (1973) (27 April 2009, [http://www.the-highway.com/cross\\_Packer.html](http://www.the-highway.com/cross_Packer.html)), 1.

39 Stephen Travis, ‘Christ as Bearer of Divine Judgment’, in Joel Green and Max Turner (eds.), *Jesus of Nazareth Lord and Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 345.

40 Travis, ‘Christ as Bearer’, 345.

dom and the leading edge of Modernity';<sup>41</sup> it was a protest against the idea that adhering to Christian civil society as a nominal Christian was sufficient. Thus, it was necessary for the gospel to be reprinted in personal terms.

Within a significant proportion of contemporary society, though, the traditional idea of 'sin' is increasingly absent.<sup>42</sup> The recognition (whether active or dormant) that one is a sinner, and corresponding sense of guilt that characterised Calvin's assumptions concerning atonement, no longer applies so readily and automatically. Shame has largely replaced guilt, suggesting we should stop using the word 'sin', even if we retain the *concept*.<sup>43</sup> At a minimum, we should recognise 'there are real differences in the big epochs in history when it comes to perceptions of sin' and that this is important, once we admit 'sin defines how we approach atonement'.<sup>44</sup>

Contemporary people more readily see themselves as victims of sin than its perpetrators. However, while we must not relativise the sin problem, these categories may not be as distinct as we suppose; victims and perpetrators may turn out to be the same people. We might even say that Christ is presented to us scripturally as both vicarious sinner and vicarious victim.<sup>45</sup>

We turn now to sin's consequences in wrath, justice and retributive punishment. The pivotal issue is probably that of wrath.<sup>46</sup> There has been much recent discussion of God's wrath, particularly founded in Romans.<sup>47</sup> The penal substitutionary view is that the holiness of God demands wrath against the sinner.<sup>48</sup> CH Dodd, however, has argued its meaning is located in God's anger not as personal but impersonal, the inevitable result of our sin. Paul therefore uses wrath not to describe the attitude of God to man, but an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe.<sup>49</sup> Since Paul never uses 'to be angry' with God as subject, we should hesitate to conclude Paul thought of God's anger in this way.<sup>50</sup> Divine judgement notions of punishment and retribution 'lie on the periphery of his thought'.<sup>51</sup> Wrath is not an anticipated future threat, but already present,<sup>52</sup> experienced as the God-given consequences of people's choices and actions.<sup>53</sup>

41 D. Bruce Hindmarsh, 'Let Us See Thy Great Salvation', in John Stackhouse (ed.), *What Does It Mean To Be Saved?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 65.

42 Alan Mann, *Atonement for a 'Sinless' Society* (Bletchley: Paternoster, 2005).

43 Mann, 'Sinless' Society, 203-4.

44 McKnight, *Community*, 48.

45 2 Cor. 5:21. Smail, *Once*, 49.

46 Green, 'Must We Imagine', 160.

47 For a comprehensive review, see Stephen Travis, *Christ and the Judgement of God – The Limits of Divine Retribution in New Testament Thought* (Bletchley: Paternoster, 2009), 53-73.

48 Grant Osborne, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 46.

49 C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932), 23.

50 Dodd, *Romans*, 21.

51 Travis, 'Christ as Bearer', 21.

52 Green, 'Must We Imagine', 163.

53 Travis, 'Christ as Bearer', 21.

The act of God is no more than an abstention from interference with their free choice and its consequence ... [Paul] has therefore succeeded in disassociating the fact of retribution from any idea of an angry God visiting his displeasure upon sinful men, even though he retains the old expression 'the Wrath of God'.<sup>54</sup>

Leon Morris and Grant Osborne, however, are among those who reject this 'ingenious argument';<sup>55</sup> God's wrath against sin is 'too comprehensive in Scripture to allow such a reinterpretation'.<sup>56</sup> The idea that the wrath of God is exercised against sin 'runs through and through the OT' and is 'intensely personal'.<sup>57</sup>

If this is the case, though, asks Green, is it not significant that God's wrath is never developed in the OT in sacrificial terms and that we find no exposition of sacrifice as satisfaction or penalty?<sup>58</sup> Finding, in Rom. 3, an implicit need to assuage God's wrath is based on a false presumed relation of wrath, sacrifice and atonement in the OT.<sup>59</sup>

Examining the role and function of sacrifice in atonement to test these points is not an entirely straightforward hermeneutical exercise. Firstly, biblical sacrifices were made not just for sin;<sup>60</sup> sacrifice 'is a grander idea and does not in itself require a narrative of God's judicial wrath needing to be satisfied'.<sup>61</sup> There is a 'kaleidoscope of images which together constitute the NT characterisation of Jesus as sacrifice',<sup>62</sup> as different strands of the OT language of sacrifice are applied to Jesus in different ways,<sup>63</sup> each in its own way bearing witness to a dimension of Jesus' work.<sup>64</sup>

What then of the meaning of *kippēr*? Penal substitution's interpretation (propitiation) is not universally accepted. According to Jacob Milgrom, the root meaning of *kippēr* lies in wiping off or removing, suggesting that it means 'to purge', to expunge impurity. Furthermore, some scholars understand He therefore sees both the Day of Atonement rituals and Rom. 3:25 in expiatory, rather than propitiatory, terms.<sup>65</sup>

Since it seems significant that Jesus apparently chose Passover (a time for celebrating and remembering liberation) rather than the Day of Atonement (a

54 Dodd, *Romans*, 29.

55 Leon Morris, *The Atonement: its Meaning and Significance* (Leicester: IVP, 1983), 154.

56 Grant Osborne, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 46.

57 Morris, *Atonement*, 155-56.

58 Green, 'Must We Imagine', 161. Howard Marshall agrees that 'the specific language of penalty does not seem to be associated with it'. I. Howard Marshall, 'The Theology of the Atonement', in Tidball, Hilborn and Thacker (eds.), *Atonement Debate*, 60.

59 Green, 'Must We Imagine', 161.

60 Gunton, *Actuality*, 120.

61 Steve Motyer, 'The Atonement in Hebrews', in Tidball, Hilborn and Thacker (eds.), *Atonement Debate*, 137.

62 Gunton, *Actuality*, 126ff.

63 Gunton, *Actuality*, 122.

64 John Hartley, *Leviticus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 244.

65 Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16* (Anchor Bible, New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1079-84.

time for atoning sins) to explicate the significance of his death,<sup>66</sup> we will briefly consider the Passover lamb.

Though it is often assumed that penal substitution lies at the heart of the Passover, this is not self-evident. Clearly, the Passover lamb was ‘sacrificed’, at least in modern terms, although in precisely what capacity we cannot be definitive.<sup>67</sup> Milgrom is clear that the sacrifice of the lamb is not a sin-offering (*hattā’t*); neither is the verb *kippēr* used in the texts on the paschal observance.<sup>68</sup> Stephen Finlan points out that the Passover sacrifice was ‘completely different from other sacrifices ... having nothing to do with cleansing, forgiveness, or reparation.’<sup>69</sup> Neither is there any developed idea of sacrifice, in the manner of the later atonement offerings.

Moreover, there are further problems here. If Passover was a penal substitutionary event, why was its application limited to Israel’s firstborn sons? Why not the entire nation? Equally, if the lamb is a penal substitute to avoid Israel suffering the fate of God’s judgement against the Egyptians, it seems odd that this arrangement of protection should be required only for the *final* plague. The object heretofore has been God’s punishment exclusively upon Egypt.

Whatever the origins of Passover, it was understood at the time of Jesus as a gift-offering of praise and thanksgiving to God for his deliverance.<sup>70</sup> The first-century *Pesah* was fundamentally a national celebration designed to keep fresh the memory of the exodus and reassure the people that God ‘would smite all future tyrants as he had Pharaoh’ – celebrating God’s past liberation and anticipating his future liberation.<sup>71</sup> The ritual identifies the nation that Yahweh’s action is redeeming. Through its obedient *cultus* participation, Israel is ‘marked out’ as the redeemed, distinguished from Egypt and ‘set apart’ as those upon whom his blessing rests.<sup>72</sup> This fits well with the meaning of *pesah* as ‘protection’. It was ‘a God-given covenant meal that identified his people as exempt from judgement and ready for deliverance.’<sup>73</sup>

By choosing Passover to explain his death, then, instead of the Day of Atonement, Jesus was choosing images of divine protection and liberation.<sup>74</sup>

66 McKnight, *Community*, 85.

67 By Jesus’ time, ‘the sacrificial aspect had come to infiltrate the concept’ and ‘once Christians began to compare Jesus to the paschal lamb, they did not hesitate to use sacrificial language’. Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Volume 1 (Anchor Bible, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), 62. 1 Cor. 5:7.

68 Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 1081.

69 Stephen Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 13.

70 Fiddes, *Event*, 65. Morris, *Atonement*, 92.

71 McKnight, *Jesus*, 253-54; 273.

72 An idea reflected in 1 Pet. 2:9.

73 Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 40.

74 McKnight, *Community*, 86.

Although the Last Supper is commonly assumed to be a Passover meal,<sup>75</sup> supporting evidence is far from clear, and the balance of scholarship today is shifting away from that conclusion.<sup>76</sup> Given that sacrifice in covenant ratification had no substitutionary function, let alone a penal one,<sup>77</sup> it is notable that the Synoptics and Paul posit the Last Supper's sacramental significance in covenantal terms.<sup>78</sup> This does not preclude a forgiveness element, but this comes by sharing in the new Passover – entering covenant by *participation* in his meal, drinking from his cup.<sup>79</sup> The absence of reference to the lamb is curious, too. Why would Jesus not have applied the more-natural theme of 'this lamb is my body' rather than the bread?<sup>80</sup> If Passover had direct correspondence in Jesus' thought, McKnight sees this as 'a virtual soteriological necessity'.<sup>81</sup> Accordingly, he concludes the supper took place in a *Pesah* setting, with Jesus turning a regular Passover-week meal into 'a kind of *Pesah*'.<sup>82</sup>

In another key passage, the Suffering Servant of Deutero-Isaiah, a central question is whether Jesus thought of himself in these terms. Notably, in none of the sayings attributed to Jesus does he designate himself as the Servant. If one has this conclusion in mind already, of course, it is easy to find numerous 'servant' and 'suffering' references to support it. An important hermeneutical question here is whether a NT quotation from the OT indicates the whole original passage is to be brought to mind, or just the text quoted.<sup>83</sup> Adopting the former view broadens the material available to support such an hypothesis.<sup>84</sup> Otherwise, though, the verses from Isaiah cited in e.g. Matt. 8:16-17, Matt. 12:18-21 and Luke 4:16-21 indicate different characteristics of Jesus and his mission.

If a vicarious bearing of sin by the Servant is in mind, it is surprising this is not somewhere stated explicitly, especially in Jesus' predictions of his death. One might argue the Servant was the only basis Jesus could have had for interpreting his sufferings, but this is reading into the silence. The Servant passage is a unique OT reference to vicarious atoning suffering,<sup>85</sup> even though the idea of

75 Peter Head, 'Christ as Sacrifice in Gospel and Acts', in Roger Beckwith and Martin Selman (eds.), *Sacrifice in the Bible* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1995), 114.

76 McKnight, *Jesus*, 257. On the options, see 264-73.

77 Jeffery, Ovey and Sach see covenantal 'allusions' as sitting alongside Passover references but not replacing them. *Pierced*, 39.

78 Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25.

79 Jersak and Hardin, *Nonviolent Identification*, 40.

80 Probably because there was no lamb at the meal, according to McKnight, *Community*, 84.

81 McKnight, *Jesus*, 270. Morris, *Atonement*, 104.

82 McKnight, *Jesus*, 272.

83 See Morna Hooker, *Jesus and the Servant* (London: SPCK, 1959), 21-23.

84 All but one of the references to 'my servant' prior to Isa. 52:13 explicitly apply to Israel/Jacob. Sue Groom, 'Why Did Christ Die?', in Tidball, Hilborn and Thacker (eds.), *Atonement Debate*, 99.

85 Hermann Spieckermann, 'The Conception and Prehistory of the Idea of Vicarious Suffering in the Old Testament', in Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher (eds.), *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, trans. Daniel Bailey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 1. 2 Macc. 7:37-38; 6:28-29; 17:20-22.

enduring suffering and subsequent vindication is certainly not. Paul makes no use of the Servant figure, even though he twice quotes from the fourth Song. Only in 1 Pet. 2 do we find 'the full identification of Jesus with the Servant in all its Christological significance'.<sup>86</sup>

## IV. Towards a synthesis in today's church

### *a. Worldview and heritage*

Since some proponents claim penal substitution to be foundational to all other theories of atonement, we should consider the underlying epistemological presupposition.

Modern Western culture and society has been built on the Enlightenment's concept of truth, which has four basic components: *objectivity* – truth is outside of us and independent of us; *universality* – truth is the same the world over and for all people, unaffected by cultural differences; *eternity* – truths remain true forever; and, *intelligibility* – we as human beings are able to discover, comprehend and know the truth.<sup>87</sup> Since knowledge must be built on a sure footing, Enlightenment 'foundationalism' borrows from the metaphor of a building, where the 'foundation' consists of a set of unquestioned basic beliefs that are supposedly universal and context-free. The primary idea of foundationalism is that a 'most basic' belief on any given subject anchors other beliefs that arise as conclusions from it. Thus, the foundationalist's initial task for the construction of a knowledge edifice on a subject (such as atonement) is to determine the foundational belief or principle on which that subject-knowledge rests. In approaching theology, conservative modernists routinely understand knowledge as 'the compiling of correct conclusions from a sure foundation'.<sup>88</sup>

One can clearly identify Enlightenment epistemology underlying PSA's hermeneutical expectation of one, foundational theory. However, whilst foundationalism was 'undeniably the epistemological king of the post-Enlightenment, modern era', it no longer commands broad unquestioned acceptance.<sup>89</sup> Some postmodern writers propose that rather than a building metaphor, we should think in terms of a 'belief mosaic',<sup>90</sup> whilst others suggest that knowledge is 'structured more like a spider's web where each strand supports all the other strands, which in turn support it'.<sup>91</sup> To conservatives, though, the notion of a 'web of belief',<sup>92</sup> with implied multiple anchor points for truth, sounds suspi-

86 Hooker, *Servant*, 127; on Petrine influence, see 16-18.

87 Peter Hicks, *Evangelicals and Truth* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), 10.

88 Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville: John Knox, 2001), 47, 30.

89 Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 38.

90 Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 51.

91 Sven Bernecker, *Reading Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 2.

92 Willard van Orman Quine and J. S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief* (New York: Random House, 1970).



ciously close to an epistemology infected by the postmodern rejection of absolute truth. In contrast, however, these alternative metaphors sit comfortably within a *kaleidoscopic* view – when one’s starting point is a post-foundational approach to epistemology, no single atonement theory needs to be most basic. Conversely, retention of one such belief will assume even greater importance if it is perceived as defending the traditional Christian metanarrative against post-modern relativism.

The Reformed understanding of the ‘formal principle’ of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura*, is a cornerstone of its approach to theology.

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for ... salvation, faith and life, is either *expressly set down* in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be *deduced from* Scripture: unto which *nothing at any time is to be added*, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men.<sup>93</sup>

Closely connected to the *authority* of scripture is its *reliability* – its inherent truth or ‘inerrancy’ as the Word of God. These became the principal issues for the conservative-liberal schisms in evangelicalism in the 19th and 20th centuries contemporaneous with the development of biblical criticism. One of the doctrines taking centre stage on the battleground was atonement, where conservatives routinely found themselves defending the penal substitutionary doctrine.<sup>94</sup> In 1879, for example, the emerging liberal perspectives were said to be ‘distinguished by the milder views they take on the character of God [and] by the disuse of terror as an instrument of persuasion’; for them, ‘the Fatherhood of God was a typical theme and eternal punishment a typical omission.’<sup>95</sup>

The relevance of this to our question is several-fold. Firstly, even allowing for uncritical acceptance of *sola Scriptura*, it is still necessary in the absence of any credal statements for someone to determine what kind of atonement story is ‘expressly set down’ or the authoritative hermeneutical method by which we ‘deduce’ it. Luther’s dispute with Eck involved whose interpretations held sway: tradition, in the form of the Church’s understanding, or the ordinary believer and her conscience. One might say that in the atonement debate this has now swung around, with the Reformers’ understanding occupying the ground of Church tradition.<sup>96</sup> If John Gerstner asserts correctly that ‘to the evangelical, theological precision *at least on essential matters* is vital’,<sup>97</sup> then the hegemony of evangelical

93 Westminster Confession (1647). Emphasis added.

94 David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 200–201.

95 Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 145.

96 A point made by McKnight, *Community*, 91, in context of the New Perspective’s argument for a new application of *sola Scriptura* against sacred (Reformed) tradition.

97 John Gerstner, ‘Theological Boundaries: The Reformed Perspective’, in David Wells and John Woodbridge (eds.), *The Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), as cited by R.A. Mohler, ‘Evangelical: What’s in a Name?’, in J.H. Armstrong (ed.), *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 31. Emphasis added.



theologians is unavoidable, given that atonement is an essential matter.

Secondly, it is all too easy to conflate the defending of scripture *itself* with defending a particular *understanding* of what scripture says on a subject. The accretive logic in the following assertion by one Reformed writer illustrates the problem: 'Protestants who accept the Bible as their authority and are heirs of the Reformation do agree with one another on the basics of salvation.'<sup>98</sup> We are close here to saying if the Reformers were right about the importance of scripture then they must also have been right about anything they saw as important *in* scripture. Stephen Holmes, writing as one wishing to defend penal substitution,<sup>99</sup> concedes the possibility of an *a posteriori* hermeneutic of atonement:

Much of the language about the atonement in the NT could be understood in penal substitutionary terms if we had good reason to do so, but equally could be understood in other terms. When we read of Jesus 'redeeming' us, or 'paying the price' for our sin, if we already know from somewhere else that penal substitution is the right way to understand the atonement, then we can read these as different ways of describing penal substitution. When you look at writers arguing that penal substitution is the right way to understand the cross in the Bible, this seems to be what a lot of them do.<sup>100</sup>

In questioning why, from the early 19th century, there was growing liberal rejection of a doctrine based in penal violence, Holmes alights on changing European perceptions of criminal justice, away from the public infliction of violence towards a more rehabilitative view based upon the prison. This may explain the difficulty for someone, taught by cultural shifts to regard the earlier tradition as barbaric, having to accept a story of the cross which situates its understanding of penalty in an older cultural tradition. Conversely, those accepting the earlier tradition would find it culturally easier to interpret the cross in terms of Jesus bearing the punishment we were due.<sup>101</sup>

The metanarrative that justice is accomplished by inflicting violence is now rare in Western society, much of which no longer practices the death penalty and holds no therapeutic or judicial role for violence. Furthermore, its sentencing system is based on a judicial *quid pro quo* (equivalence between sentence and level of crime).<sup>102</sup> If the *worst* crime carries no death penalty in human courts of justice, there is a logical problem with the *least* crime carrying a *full* death penalty in its divine equivalent. In order to promote the Christian gospel, then, must we first convince people that their judicial framework is wrong, or, that God's is

98 W. Robert Godfrey, 'Martin Luther: An Evangelical Original', in Armstrong (ed.), *Evangelical Crisis*, 53.

99 Although, arguably, Holmes' thesis provides stronger evidence for PSA's opponents.

100 Holmes, *Wondrous Cross*, 43.

101 Stephen Holmes, 'Ransomed, Healed, Restored, Forgiven', in Tidball, Hilborn and Thacker (eds.), *Atonement Debate*, 273-74.

102 Leanne Van Dyk, 'How Does Jesus Make a Difference?', in William Placher (ed.), *Essentials of Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 212.

both different and superior? The latter appears to be its proponents' expectation. Morris, for example, insists

... we are not being saved with reference to our legal systems [but to] the eternal law of God, and we are not justified in assuming that this law runs in all points exactly like all our human laws. It may be that it allows more room for mercy than do our law codes.<sup>103</sup>

Some would say such a 'law of God' appears to allow less room for mercy. Morris insists 'we have strictly no *right* to punish merely for reformatory and deterrent purposes',<sup>104</sup> but this risks characterising God as a bloodthirsty Judge who, in contrast to enlightened contemporary human justice, requires bloody violence as recompense (appropriating divine imagery which just happens to correspond to primitive, pre-Modern thought).

### *b. Contemporary culture*

Warfield presciently observed that Christians must state their beliefs in terms of modern thought, since every age has a language of its own and can speak no other; however, he cautioned that 'mischief comes' when, instead, modern thought is stated in terms of Christian belief.<sup>105</sup> Adjudging the difference between the two is, of course, the challenge. Conscious of the perceived threat of Postmodernity, for example, one writer has recently appealed to evangelicals to resist 'those explicitly calling for a program of theological revisionism to recast evangelicalism in a mode more attractive to twentieth century secular culture.'<sup>106</sup>

The deepest divisions in the evangelical world have generally arisen from the impact of 'cultural waves',<sup>107</sup> different responses to the same cultural mood. This was highlighted in the early 20th century conflicts between liberals seeking to modify traditional received theology in the light of contemporary thought and conservatives attempting to affirm and defend timeless truths against the *Zeitgeist* (one such reaction being the birth of fundamentalism). Though we may think that the debate has move on from a simplistic liberal-conservative polarisation, the challenge for evangelicals, as to how properly to respond to cultural conditions, does not go away.

It is easy to assume that the theological thought-lines of Modernity are the normative Christian perspective against which Postmodernity should be judged. However, Modernity is not culturally 'neutral'. Nor is it necessarily more amenable to Christian faith than the worldviews that precede or follow it. The danger for evangelicalism, the birth of which closely correlates with the onset of the Enlightenment,<sup>108</sup> is to fail to treat all cultural contexts – Modernity included – as

---

103 Morris, *Cross*, 387.

104 Morris, *Cross*, 385.

105 G. L. W. Johnson, 'Does Theology Still Matter', in Armstrong (ed.), *Evangelical Crisis*, 70.

106 Mohler, 'Evangelical', 32.

107 Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 275.

108 Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 1.

offering, contemporaneously, both threat and opportunity and, equally, requiring theological reimagination. As John Franke has rightly said

... there is technically no such thing as premodern, modern or postmodern dogmatics. There is only Christian dogmatics pursued in the context of particular social and intellectual situations. In these local settings, contemporary challenges and concerns are addressed and critical theological use is made of the conceptual tools and concepts of a specific time and place for the purpose of clarifying, explaining, and illuminating the universal truth of the Christian faith in the midst of numerous historical and cultural locations.<sup>109</sup>

As evangelicals who wish to be shaped by Scripture and informed by tradition, but who do not wish to be the product of any particular culture, we should always be attuned to identifying cultural impression in our current theology. This is a necessity if we are in principle open to *semper reformandum*. As Franke puts it, 'the process of reformation is not, and never can be, something completed once and for all and appealed to in perpetuity.'<sup>110</sup> Protestant theology has, though, proven susceptible to 'the conservative distortion of so closely equating theology with the events, creeds and confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as to virtually eliminate, in practice if not in theory, the reforming principle.'<sup>111</sup>

For post-conservative evangelicals such as Stanley Grenz, the quest for a culture-free theology is both ill-founded and unwarranted. Rather, culture must be viewed as a resource for theology; the Bible, heritage and culture play different roles but are, in practice, nearly inseparable.<sup>112</sup> Similarly, for Lesslie Newbigin, the gospel is embodied in culturally-conditioned forms from beginning to end. He argues the idea of a pure, distilled gospel unadulterated by any cultural accretions is an illusion. Cultural appeasement is avoided by the gospel calling into question all cultures, including the one in which it was originally embodied.<sup>113</sup>

### *c. Synthesis in today's church*

How, then, might we proceed to achieve synthesis? One method to get together two sides with implacably opposed starting points, without either needing to concede defeat, is to move to new ground, what we might call a 'Third Way'. This involves reworking all our atonement thinking around a relocated 'centre-point', which could in principle be an entirely new model, the adopting or varying of

109 John Franke, *The Character of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 41.

110 Franke, *Character*, 42.

111 Franke, *Character*, 43.

112 Stanley Grenz, 'How Do We Know What To Believe?', in Placher (ed.), *Essentials*, 30, 33. 'We do not first get our understanding of the Bible straight and then look to our common heritage to make sure we are orthodox before finally seeking to understand these matters within our social context.'

113 Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 4.

an existing model, or a synthesis of models.<sup>114</sup> Critical in such an exercise is the identification of the core theological characteristics precious to each side. We can then evaluate any proposed 'synthesis-model' based upon its ability to cohere with them. If they are properly and fully identified, then a model should be self-validating and the parties should find the result amenable. For either side to accept, though, any synthesis-model will need to be one in which sufficient 'family resemblance' can still be found.

For the kaleidoscopic view, key characteristics would include: properly reflecting the nature and character of the loving God; relating to people who live in a postmodern world (flexibility in the telling); a sufficiently broad view of both sin and salvation (not merely autobiographical); a place for Christ's incarnation, life and resurrection as well as his death; liberation from current caricatures; and, being fundamentally relational in character. We ought easily to find common ground in a model's affirmation of the significance of relationship, for evangelicals have always emphasised the centrality of knowing Christ personally; and, as Stephen Travis has shown, the NT's primary category for understanding salvation and judgement is in terms of relationship or non-relationship to Christ.<sup>115</sup>

For the penal substitutionary view: it must be the work of God alone; apprehended by grace through faith; take sin seriously; deal with the need for God to act justly; and, hold the cross as central, Christ's death being understood as efficacious. A synthesis-model must also be faithful to the evangelical and Reformed principle of *sola Scriptura*. A reasonable test for faithfulness to the biblical materials might be a synthesis-model's capacity to accommodate, or interface with, existing atonement models.

Stated in this way, though, have we sidestepped express reference to punishment? Insofar as that involves expunging justice and the accountability inherent in biblical language of judgement, then no. In the sense that, though God may have willed the dire consequences that ensue on sin, it does not necessarily follow that he has willed them retributively, punitively, then yes.<sup>116</sup> A 'fitting' response need not be retributive, and wrath need not be capricious.<sup>117</sup> We may, though, need to admit that unwillingness to deconstruct traditional Reformation language of wrath and punishment at the cross could still prove an immovable stumbling block in our project.

Finally, to avoid the charge of cultural acclimatisation, our remodelling must be tested, as Newbigin argued, for infection by *all* worldviews, not simply testing

114 Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), follows such an approach, synthesising moral influence, penal *representation* and *Christus Victor*. See 255.

115 Travis, *Judgement of God*.

116 C. F. D. Moule, 'Punishment and Retribution' (Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok 30, 23-4, 1965), as cited by Travis, *Judgement of God*, 54.

117 We find in Paul 'only traces' of retributive judgement. Rather, consequences of sin follow by inner necessity (under God's control) imposed from outside. Travis, *Judgement of God*, 62, 84.

Postmodernity against Modernity's supposed norms, or *vice versa*. Truth lives *outside* of culture, even though its expression in thought forms and symbols lives *within* it.

Based on these key characteristics, we shall propose two approaches. The first looks to the recapitulation model originating in the writings of Irenæus; the second centres atonement in the biblical concept of covenant.

Irenæus saw Christ as 'recapitulating' (or, summing up) human life in himself. Because of his love for us, Christ became what we are, so that he might bring us to be what he is himself.<sup>118</sup> For Irenæus, humanity could not overcome corruptibility and mortality except by being united to incorruptibility and immortality. However, this could not happen unless, first, 'incorruptibility and immortality had become that which we also are', the corruptible being 'swallowed up' by the incorruptible and the mortal by immortality, so that we might receive adoption as sons.<sup>119</sup> A transformational purpose is at work here: Christ the Son of God became the Son of Man, so that 'man' might receive adoption and become the 'son' of God.<sup>120</sup> What was lost for us by Adam has been won back by Christ, 'undoing' or 'reversing' what went wrong in Adam. Thus the divine plan for the new covenant was a 'recapitulation' of the original creation.<sup>121</sup>

Underlying Irenæus' idea is the recovery of the *imago dei*. Humanity is created in accordance with the *Logos*, who is himself the image of God. The effect of the Fall, though, is corruption. By embracing humanity in living a human life, the Word who is himself the image of God arrests the Fall, restoring the image. By encountering human death, he destroyed the power of death.<sup>122</sup>

Morna Hooker is amongst those who has built on these ideas;<sup>123</sup> she stresses not just Christ's identification with us but also the need for us to identify with him. Christ became what we are, in order that, *in him*, we might become what he is: the true image of God.<sup>124</sup> The attitude and behaviour of those 'in Christ' should conform to his. In becoming like us, 'he was obedient; he emptied himself; he humbled himself; he became poor; he identified himself with the sinful and with outcasts.'<sup>125</sup> This 'interchange' is not an exchange but a sharing of experience (2 Cor. 5:21), for we become the righteousness of God *in him*.<sup>126</sup> It is a process of participation; Christ suffers as man's representative, not his substitute.<sup>127</sup> Adam and Christ each stand as representative and inclusive figures: what

118 Irenæus, *Against Heresies*, Book V, Preface.

119 Irenæus, *Against Heresies*, Book III, 19.1.

120 Ibid.

121 Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin, 1967), 80.

122 Andrew Louth, 'Later Theologians of the Greek East', in Philip Esler (ed.), *The Early Christian World Volumes 1-2* (London: Routledge, 2000), 584-85.

123 Also, McKnight, *Community*, 54-60; *Jesus*, 349-52.

124 Morna Hooker, *From Adam to Christ* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1990), 18-19.

125 Hooker, *Adam to Christ*, 63.

126 Hooker, *Adam to Christ*, 26,,17.

127 Hooker, *Adam to Christ*, 22.

each did affects all those who are 'in' them as their descendants (1 Thess. 5:10). The *obedience* of Christ, rather than vicarious *punishment*, led to vindication for him and those who are 'in him'.<sup>128</sup>

How, then, does this basis for atonement stack up against our core criteria for a synthesis-model? Those qualities sought by the kaleidoscopic view are largely met:

- it is closely linked with the incarnation and Christ's life;
- it is fundamentally *relational*,<sup>129</sup>
- its primary conception of sin as corruption rather than law-breaking (though the one does not rule out the other) spans both 'victim' and 'perpetrator';
- it sees our *deepest* need not as forgiveness of the past but transformation of our inner beings at their inmost roots;<sup>130</sup>
- its reversing of the problems, and renewing of the original creation, fits with a broad view of salvation involving the whole created order; and
- its pre-modern categories are amenable to the postmodern mind.

The ethical implications are clear (Rom. 8:1-4): what God has done through this interchange enables the righteous requirements of the law to be fully met in those who are in Christ by the Spirit.<sup>131</sup> In effect, the transfer is 'ontic transformation'.<sup>132</sup>

What, then, of Reformed and evangelical expectations? Again, the qualities sought are largely met:

- the theology can be expressly found in scripture;
- in looking at 'sin' by reference to its original biblical source, the problem and solution are matched *ab initio*;
- it is clearly the work of God in Christ, and one of unmerited grace (emphasis on our participation falls short of invoking suspicion of salvation by works);
- evangelistically, it invokes imagery of 'new birth' in Christ; and
- individual acceptance is required in response (it remains personal without being excessively individualistic).

However, is such a model still *cruciform*? Certainly, for the cross is where Christ becomes sin for us and bears humanity's curse. His death and resurrection enable us to share in his resurrection and status of sonship.<sup>133</sup> Against some interpretations, though, it gives emphasis to Christ's incarnation, life and resurrection, alongside the death. It is not *crux sola* because the entire life of Jesus

128 Hooker, *Adam to Christ*, 31. Calvin himself affirmed the atoning role of Christ's obedience. *Institutes*, II, 16:5.

129 McKnight, *Community*, 59.

130 Maurice Wiles, *The Christian Fathers* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1966), 108.

131 Hooker, *Adam to Christ*, 60.

132 McKnight, *Jesus*, 351.

133 Hooker, *Adam to Christ*, 35.

atones, in line with Phil. 2:5-11, perhaps the most complete statement of his atoning work we find in the entire NT.<sup>134</sup> Admittedly, the juridical *motif* is in softer focus; God's justice is reflected more in his taking responsibility to resolve the troubles of his creation than in sentencing humanity for its part in it.

As an idea of atonement originating in one of the earliest Church Fathers, Irenæus' writings deserve to be taken seriously. And, by sourcing our synthesis in pre-modern thought-forms which are close to the world of the NT writers, Postmodernity's disdain for Modernity's categories – and *vice versa* – can be nullified.

Our second proposal, to centre atonement in the biblical concept of covenant, has been extensively developed by Larry Shelton.<sup>135</sup> He presents covenant as a perspective from which all other models can be evaluated, since all models ask how broken covenant relationship can be restored. The Bible presents covenant as 'God's way of working', with the general concept of covenant relationship pervading the OT and serving as the predominant biblical background for salvation.<sup>136</sup> In effect, then, Shelton is proposing covenant as a 'most basic' belief in relation to atonement. Christianity is understood as sharing a continuing covenant into which Christians have been grafted. Christ's revelation is the last phase of God's faithfulness to his covenant commitment of salvation, initially to Israel and, ultimately, to the entire world.<sup>137</sup> This spiritual thread runs throughout the Bible.

Shelton is critical of all culturally-conditioned articulations of atonement that introduce elements alien to covenant thinking, such as civil law, feudal hierarchies and retributive vengeance.<sup>138</sup> The covenant model does not presuppose Western understandings of law, order and retribution as the context for God's saving activity.<sup>139</sup> To restore the covenant relationship while taking seriously the sin that destroyed it, the problem must firstly be conceived in *interpersonal* terms. In the OT, sacrifices were made both for establishing and restoring covenantal relationship. Thus sin, as a violation of covenant, is a violation of relationship, a betrayal of trust. It is a *moral* transgression, not a *legal* one. Christ has offered the sacrifice that renews the covenant relationship. Not the satisfaction of a legal penalty for lawbreaking, but the ultimate manifestation of covenant obedience.

He is the man God has always been looking for who shows himself to be God's man fulfilling the covenant; the man who on the cross loves the Lord his God with all his heart and soul and mind and strength and his neigh-

134 McKnight, *Community*, 60.

135 R. Larry Shelton, *Cross and Covenant* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006). On covenant from a penal substitutionary proponent: Morris, *Atonement*, 14-42.

136 Shelton, *Covenant*, 38-39, 143. 'Berith' occurs nearly 300 times.

137 As Morris puts it, 'the new covenant is God's final way'. *Atonement*, 42.

138 Shelton, *Covenant*, 21.

139 Shelton, *Covenant*, xvii-xviii.



bour, and indeed his enemy, as himself.<sup>140</sup>

Since all sin is essentially relational, the means of *overcoming* the curse of sin must also be personal and relational. In the sacrificial rituals, the critical element was that the offeror *identify* with the animal, symbolised by the laying on of a hand, its offering symbolising the offeror's surrender of self to God. Accordingly, the primary OT sense of sacrifice is the presenting of a gift to God.

In developing an interpretive framework for Christ in the NT, Shelton draws on recapitulation and interchange imagery and the restoration of the *imago dei*. His categories are essentially identification and representation. In this relational understanding of the cross, God is understood to be healing broken relationships and drawing wayward children back into right family relations.<sup>141</sup> Salvation is not an 'it' that God offers, but a relationship he enters with believers.<sup>142</sup>

How, then, in this view are we made righteous in Christ? In Hebrew thought, righteousness is defined in covenant terms of right relationship, rather than as an abstract quality that can be possessed by someone.<sup>143</sup> Imputational 'as if' language of legal acquittal misses the fact that Paul is speaking not of some fictive legal status but of the *actual* restoration of interpersonal relationship – righteousness means being in faithful relationship with God's divine covenant expectations.<sup>144</sup> The penal view, then, is faulty in saying that God 'declares' us righteous as a 'judicial verdict'.<sup>145</sup> The goal of God's righteousness is the restoring of relationships, not the legal task of matching punishments to crimes committed.<sup>146</sup>

Once again, where does this idea stand with regard to our core requirements for synthesis? Although this way of viewing covenant is not synonymous with Reformed covenant (or 'federal') theology of the sixteenth and seventeenth century,<sup>147</sup> talk of 'justification' is covenant language.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, Reformed scholars have agreed that covenant serves 'as a theological concept to characterize the *essential* nature of the relationship between God and humanity.'<sup>149</sup> Covenant

140 Smail, *Once*, 77.

141 Shelton, *Covenant*, 32.

142 Shelton, *Covenant*, 107.

143 Shelton, *Covenant*, 120, 112.

144 Shelton, *Covenant*, 117. Travis, *Judgement*, 191-93.

145 Against, e.g. John Stott, *Evangelical Truth* (Leicester: IVP, 1999), 95-96.

146 Shelton, *Covenant*, 114. Shelton is not alone in finding significance in covenant: see also NT Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), xi; Martin Hengel, trans. John Bowden, *The Atonement* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1981), 45; 53; Fiddes, *Event*, 76-77; and Tom Smail, 'Can One Man Die For The People?', in Goldingay (ed.), *Atonement Today*, 87; 36-37 and 77-78.

147 On covenant theology's development in historical context, A. T. B. McGowan, *The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), 1-19; Peter Lillback, 'Covenant', in Sinclair Ferguson and David Wright (eds.), *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1998), 174-76.

148 N. T. Wright, *What St Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 117.

149 John Stek, "'Covenant' Overload in Reformed Theology', *Calvin Theological Journal*, 29 (1994), 14-15.



already serves as a 'central synthesizing concept' in the Reformed systematics tradition.<sup>150</sup> Furthermore:

- the theory is clearly biblically situated, with strong covenantal references pervading both Old and NT;
- although not expressed in legal categories, 'sin' is certainly understood as a violation of the Law in the sense of covenant faithfulness;
- sin is therefore treated in very serious terms;
- salvation is certainly the work of God alone, since in Christ the sacrifice is provided by God, working to reconcile the world to himself;<sup>151</sup>
- the individual must make a commitment in personal response, for at the heart of sacrificial imagery is the sinner's penitential identification with the sacrifice; and
- the cross is central, Jesus' death being the relationship-restoring sacrifice, albeit (consistent with Levitical sacrifices)<sup>152</sup> conceived in non-penal terms.

Although Shelton leans towards Dodd's view of wrath, a covenantal telling of the atonement story does not necessitate that reading. God's active judgement is not precluded. Some, though, may find more compatible Graham McFarlane's idea that 'within creation there is an in-built penalty clause for relational unfaithfulness.'<sup>153</sup> Is Shelton's rendition, then, weak on God's justice? Yes, if we insist on retributive penal violence as judicially controlling. No, if we permit that 'for the restoration of a relationship and, therefore, atonement to occur, divine love reshapes divine justice and does so by going beyond the boundaries established by normal law.'<sup>154</sup>

The kaleidoscopic view will find amenable the central role accorded to relationship. The place of Christ's incarnation, life and resurrection is, however, slightly more remote, encouraging us to integrate other, compatible, atonement-model ideas. This, though, is no bad thing, for we are seeking synthesis. As well as recapitulation and interchange themes, for example, a relationally-situated moral influence theory can be profitably conjoined, making the latter more adequate than when articulated in isolation. We also noted earlier the viability of a contemporary appropriation of 'sacrifice'. In viewing sin as violation of faithfulness resulting in relational breakdown, it both touches on people's contemporary experience and avoids seeing the 'problem' as breaking arbitrary universal laws, with a 'solution' based in violence. Given that relational categories are becoming almost the exclusive linguistic currency of a postmodern society,<sup>155</sup> this model's evangelistic value is considerable.

150 Stek, "'Covenant' Overload', 25.

151 Shelton, *Covenant*, 131-32.

152 Green, 'Must We Imagine', 161; Marshall, 'Atonement', 60.

153 Graham McFarlane, 'Atonement, Creation and Trinity', in Tidball, Hilborn and Thacker (eds.), *Atonement Debate*, 201.

154 McFarlane, 'Atonement', 204.

155 Shelton, *Covenant*, 120.

## V. Conclusion

In this paper, we have proposed the idea of reworking atonement thought from a relocated centre-point – what we might call a ‘Third Way’. To this end, two ideas have been posited as particularly fruitful: the first, around recapitulation and interchange; the second, around covenant. Within one or other such framework, we encourage space to be found for the various articulations of the atonement in scripture, coming together in a joined-up narrative of soteriology to speak powerfully to people today.

### Abstract

Although Christian orthodoxy has never required the adoption of one particular theory of atonement, Reformed and evangelical proponents of penal substitution (PSA) insist on its pivotal role. It is argued that the roots of this thinking lie in Enlightenment epistemology and Modern thought, corresponding to the advent of evangelicalism. PSA's claims to be *the* controlling understanding are difficult to affirm on the biblical evidence and, problematically today, its paradigm of law, justice and punishment derives from pre- and early-modern eras. The ‘kaleidoscopic’ view offers a broader biblical perspective on the nature of both ‘the problem’ and ‘the solution’ and is more accessible to post-Modern thought forms. For the sake of evangelical mission, however, seeking after synthesis is encouraged, which might be explored through a renewed centre-point in ‘recapitulation/interchange’ or ‘covenant’ imagery.

## Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology

Edited by Neil B. MacDonald and Carl R. Trueman

Karl Barth and John Calvin belong to the first rank of great theologians of the Church. Both, of course, were also Reformed theologians. Historically, Calvin's influence on Reformed doctrine has been much greater than that of Barth's, and continues to be so in the present day. In contrast, Barth's Reformed credentials have been questioned – not least in his understanding of election and atonement. The question is: who should be of greater importance for the Reformed church in the twenty-first century? Who has the better arguments on the Bible? Barth or Calvin? Doctrinal areas of focus are the nature of the atonement, Scripture, and the sacraments.

**Neil B. MacDonald** is Senior Lecturer in Theology, University of Surrey Roehampton, London, UK. **Carl R. Trueman** is Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, USA.

978-1-84227-567-2 / 229 x 152mm / 200pp (est.) / £19.99

**Paternoster, Authenticmedia Limited, 52 Presley Way, Crownhill,  
Milton Keynes, MK8 0ES**